

JOHN O' THE GREEN



JEFFERY FARNOL



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To Daddy.
with love from
Margaret.

Thomas 1936.



JOHN O' THE GREEN

By Jeffery Farnol

THE BROAD HIGHWAY

THE AMATEUR GENTLEMAN

THE HONORABLE MR. TAWNISH

BELTANE THE SMITH

THE DEFINITE OBJECT

OUR ADMIRABLE BETTY

THE GESTE OF DUKE JOCELYN

BLACK BARTLEMY'S TREASURE

MARTIN CONISBY'S VENGEANCE

PEREGRINE'S PROGRESS

SIR JOHN DERING

THE LORING MYSTERY

THE HIGH ADVENTURE

THE QUEST OF YOUTH

FAMOUS PRIZE FIGHTS

GUYFFORD OF WEARE

ANOTHER DAY

THE SHADOW AND OTHER STORIES

OVER THE HILLS

A JADE OF DESTINY

VOICES FROM THE DUST

CHARMIAN, LADY VIBART

THE WAY BEYOND

WINDS OF CHANCE

JOHN O' THE GREEN

JOHN O' THE GREEN

A Romance

BY
JEFFERY FARNOL



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To NYDIA, *that is* NAN,

whose other name is

SYMPATHY

this Romance is humbly dedicated

BRIGHTON, SUSSEX

February 10, 1935

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JOHN O' THE GREEN

CHAPTER I

TELLETH HOW JOHN TALKED WITH THE KING

TEN were they that languished in King Tristan's great dungeon at Fovant within Gerance, nine wild-seeming fellows, hairy and unkempt, and the one, — a lean comely man who sat apart, hands tight clenched, the sweat of anguish on his furrowed brow, haggard eyes turning almost furtively to watch where his companions, muttering together, peered in turn from the narrow loophole of their prison.

Now presently to this man came a slender youth, his fetters jangling, who, casting himself upon his knees, reached forth hands in passionate supplication crying:

"Oh, Master, good Master John, the townsfolk do throng them about the gallows down yonder . . . ah, will they hang us today, think ye?"

"This only God knoweth, boy."

"Shall they hang us . . . all, Master?"

"'Tis so the King hath willed."

"Jesu!" gasped the youth, blenching. "Oh, Master, is't very evil death . . . to hang?"

"Why, 'tis soon over, Sim lad, and here's some small comfort."

"Nay but . . . death frights me, good Master. . . . The rope . . . I grow sick! I've watched folk hang . . . kick they did and I . . . laughed! Oh, Blessed Mary . . . sweet Mother o' Mercy . . . I laughed! And now . . . ah, Master, Master, let me not hang . . ." And sinking upon his face, this youth Sim crouched thus, shivering and wailing in his misery.

"Now God forgive me!" groaned John, and would have lifted the woeful lad to the solace of his arms, but to them and making great clash of his shackles, strode a squat, burly, red-headed fellow.

"What's ado?" quoth he harshly. "Ha, Sim lad, Simkyn, my chicken-hearted, lily-livered younker, d' ye quake for fear o' death now? D' ye yap and whine at blink o' noose and gallows — "

"Let be, Martin, — peace, old Redhead!" quoth John, setting long arm about the fearful youth. "'Tis but a very lad — "

"Yea, so, Master, and yet outlaw and wolf's-head accursed even as we, and to die anon by steel or hemp is common lot of outlawry. So an' he outlaw live, let him like outlaw die bold and cheery. How say ye, comrades all?"

Now at this came the others, and chief among them one who, though pale with imminent death, yet bore himself with a prideful arrogance.

"Death," cried he, "'tis the outlaws' friend, no matter what guise it wear, say I. So let Death come whenso he will . . . a dance in air and so — to sleep. But for the nonce, ha, John, sweet messire and comrade, abate thy dolour and sing us cheerily — "

"Ay, Master, a song . . . a song!" cried they in chorus.

"Sing us thy song of outlawry, good John."

"Nay," he answered, "no heart have I to singing, Reynold, since I am he that is the death of ye, every one."

But at this they brake out all together in clamorous dissent:

"No, no, John!"

"Never say so, comrade!"

How John Talked with the King 5

"Us was betrayed and never no blame on thee, John!"

"Howbeit," answered John, shaking his head, "tis no other than John hath brought ye to this so grievous peradventure, and 'tis now my bitter dole that I can no more than die with ye. But look now, as we be men and Man is of God, I have read and do verily believe, by death Man unto God returneth. Thus, though as outlaws we hang unshriven of our sins, yet God He shall take us poor souls unto Himself, showing us how we may win redemption hereafter, and greater life, making this shameful death a very Door of Life unto us. Now is there not some comfort in this? Speak, — thou, Martin."

"Why, John," answered the squat fellow, shaking his red head gloomily, "I have heard tell a man is damned to everlasting fire except his sins be loosed and soul annealed by Holy Church."

"And thou, Reynold?"

"Oh, as for me, John, being of knightly lineage and bred to arms, I care and know me nought o' such scholarly matters and to my comfort had liefer hear thee sing."

Now hereupon John sighed amain, looking on them, one and all, with troubled eyes; but when he would have spoken, was clank of bar and bolt, the massy door swung open, and to them entered divers men in bright mail who with shouts and blows marshalled the doomed ten and marched them forth of the mighty keep, up and out into the sunny marketplace, where a double rank of armoured pikemen held back the eager concourse, folk of all conditions who, beholding this sorry company, began to murmur against them, a dreadful muttering that swelled to a fierce shout, a merciless roar:

"Death . . . death to the wolves'-heads! Death on all outlaws! Let them hang!"

Jangling in their fetters, the doomed ten were hustled through this clamourous populace and halted where, for their dying, a great new gallows had been set up. Then a trumpet blared and all voices hushed, only young Simkyn whimpered in his misery. Now spake a herald, very loud and clear:

"Good people, hear ye! Thus saith Tristan the King: John o' the Green, rogue and outlaw and of all outlaws chief, being about to die an' ye have ought to say, speak and be done now and forever."

"Nay, John," cried red-headed Martin, fierce and defiant, "speak them not but sing, sing for us thy comrades; troll us ditty o' death, good John, a song o' farewell, — sing, brother!"

And so, glancing from grimly gallows up to radiant heaven and round about upon the pale, set faces of his companions, John sang in voice richly sweet and clear, these words:

"Here now ten dying men stand we
Yet comrades one and all.
Ten that shall soon on gallows tree
From tribulation win us free,
So joyous should our passing be,
My comrades one and all.

"For Death methinks our souls shall mend,
Our sorrows, pains and troubles end.
Thus let us greet Death like a friend.

"To life mayhap kind Death shall light us,
Yet if a while the dark benight us,
Still, faithful be and naught shall fright us.

How John Talked with the King 7

“So, let us quit ourselves like men
Come now, my comrades all,
Take we a leap in air — and then
Awake belike to live again
Still faithful comrades all.”

His song ended, John was aware of a strange silence and looking about, beheld one approaching who limped, a smallish, high-shouldered, black-avised man, whose deep-set eyes showed bright as the gems that sparkled in cap and girdle. Heads were bared; knees touched the cobblestones; spearpoints swung glittering in salute, but this sombre man, all unheeding, looked only towards John and pausing, questioned him soft-voiced:

“Shall sinful rogues, dying on gallows, live again, fellow?”

“Ay, Majesty, e’en as shall sinful king, an’ they repent them of their sinning.”

“So! And wilt dare name me ‘sinful king’, then?”

“That will I, High Mightiness, since being man thou’rt no more than child o’ sin, maugre thy kingship.”

Tristan the King limped nearer and stood, a silent-brooding, sinister shape, staring upon John beneath knit brows.

“A gallows!” quoth he at last, between curling lips.

“Yea, verily, thy gallows, Sir King!” answered John.

“Thus ’tis disease engendered o’ thee. Well, ’tis a death kindly swift, I’ve heard.”

“True!” murmured the King. “Yet there is also death less kindly . . . by the torment.” John’s grey eyes widened, his sinewy hands clenched themselves, but his voice was steady as he answered.

“So shall death prove the more welcome, most kingly Sire.”

Awhile the King stood mute and pensive, chin 'twixt finger and thumb, then beckoning to John, he turned and limped back through the silent crowd. And forthwith John was led after, — beneath a frowning embattled gateway, across an echoing courtyard, up a narrow stair; and thus presently found himself in a small, panelled chamber, alone with the King, who sat frowning on vacancy.

"Thou art John o' the Green, these days?"

"So men do call me, Sire."

"Yet do I know thee for Aymery John, only son of Aymery, one-time Lord of High Morven."

"Your Majesty is well instruct."

"So today Fulk Fitz-urse doth usurp your heritage."

"Most true, Sire. This befell in my absence."

"Ay, John o' Green. Ye were learned youth that went overseas to consort with monkish schoolmen. Well, this youth tarried overlong, and home returning finds his noble sire treacherously slain and in High Morven, ruling in his stead, Fulk Roger Fitz-Urse. Thus did Aymery John for his scholarship barter a rich and noble heritage. How sayst thou, John o' Green?"

"Yea, my lord."

"And, being thus destitute and landless, hies him to the wildwood with his harp and there consorts with rogues and outlawed men. He singeth to them, fighteth and so brings order among them; he learns them arts of warfare, forms them into companies; in fine, cometh a menace, wherefore I, being a king politic that loveth peace, do purpose to suppress him, and thus end this growing menace. And so it is I would hang thee, John o' the Green."

"As afore said, Sire."

"And yet," quoth the King, eyeing John, his lean

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might and proud, high look, "I hear this same rogue hath a quick wit, a subtle tongue and can on rote, gittern and mandora play right skillfully, can rhyme couplets featly and sing them rarely. Well, I might use such a man."

"Now as for myself, Sir King," said John serenely, "though very paladin of blood and conquest, thou art a lame man, a discomfortable solitary soul woeful and aweary!" The King arose and limped impatient to and fro, plucking at his long chin and scowling down at the sweet-scented herbs that strewed the floor.

"Solitary?" he repeated. "Yes, verily, such as I must needs go solitary ever. And for this maimed leg I won me a province. But as to conquest . . . ha, the crags of High Morven still defy me and yonder i' the South the Duchy of Pelynt standeth yet unconquered —"

"Verily, Sir King, for 'tis mightily seated, its walls strong, its people valiant and its young Duchess a very Amazon by accounts."

"So would I have them mine."

"Alas!" sighed John. "So should more innocents die!"

King Tristan turned impatiently and drawing aside curtain of tapestry, showed a great map fairly drawn and painted, affixed to the panelling.

"Lo!" said he, pointing lean finger. "Here lieth Pelynt with Pentavalon its chief and strongest city to the southeast. Here, mid rock and crag, is High Morven, where Fulk Fitz-Urse hath his foul lair. Here, midway, lieth the Debatable Land, a black desolation I would make bloom again. And here, to the north, standeth my kingdom of Gerance. . . . And Fulk's lustful eye is on fair Pelynt and its lady, whiles I . . . dream of a country united! To weld these peoples into one nation!

And this, God willing, I will do. . . . Thus is Pelynt twixt hammer and anvil, and Gerance is the anvil. Now once I hold Pelynt and the Southern March, Fitz-Urse will I sweep into the sea, making all the land secure and clean of his foul rogueries for ever."

"Ay, but, Sir King, what o' this Duchess?"

"She shall to any man bold enow to wed her and, 'stead of a country, rule a home. Howbeit, by craft of state or fury of war, this will I do. . . . Lo now, thou Clapperclaw John, a land and people united to their future well-being, — this were right kingly purpose — ha?"

"So kingly, sir, 'twere better to strum lute or tootle through reedy pipe and suffer the world to wag as it listeth."

"How mean ye, rogue?"

"Blood and battle, sir, fury and flame, death and desolation — and all to the greater glory of . . . thyself — "

"Dare ye say so?"

"High Mightiness, being at point o' death by the torment, I fear thee no more than buzzing fly."

Limping to his great cushioned chair, the King sank therein and, dark brows knit above kindling eye, viewed ragged John from mired shoon to matted hair with gloomy, pensive gaze.

"Why, then," sighed he at last, "needs must I suffer thee to live a while." Here, once again, John's keen eyes wavered, his fingers clenched.

"To — live?" he muttered.

"Verily!" nodded the King. "So shalt learn to fear and serve me."

"As how, lord — how serve thee?"

"Go win me this Duchy of Pelynt."

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John stared, then he laughed and nodded: quoth he:

“Pelynt? And no more than this? Do thy kingly ambitions soar no higher? For verily I might win thee the whole world, couldst thou but endow me with power sufficing to such small matter.” Here John laughed again, but meeting the King’s cold, bright glance grew suddenly mute.

Now as they fronted each other, potent king and doomed outlaw, each viewing the other with a certain wistful intentness, in the anteroom without was sound of hasty feet, a mutter of voices; then the door opened and a grey-haired man stood bowing.

“What now, Sir Eustace?” murmured the King, his gaze still upon John’s battered visage.

“Pardon, your Majesty, but Bardolf, your Majesty’s falconer, is here with word for your Majesty —”

“Alack, my noble liege!” cried a hoarse voice and in thrust a swart fellow in livery of green who, with wild look and arms outflung, sank upon his knees, crouching at the King’s feet.

“Lord!” he gasped. “Dread Majesty! Gracious Sire!” and smiting his breast, was dumb.

“What, Bardolf!” said the King, viewing him with his sombre eyes. “Bleat not, man; speak and be done.”

“Out — out — alas!” groaned the falconer. “I bring thee dire news, lord — fire and death! Thy noble, new-built hunting lodge . . . thy goodly hawks and hounds . . . Sir Geoffrey de Broham, thy chief Huntsman and lord Warden o’ thy forests . . . gone, gone, lord, — alack . . . all gone!”

“Good my Bardolf, leave thy cackling and tell thy news plain and to the point, — speak me forthright.”

“Dread lord, today at dawn we, thy foresters, waked to sudden, dread alarm . . . the doors were beat in

upon us — thy lodge fired about us, we — thy faithful huntsmen and verderers — woefully smitten and bound — and Sir Geoffrey, thy Warden, the noble De Broham . . . alack, my lord . . . oh, woe!”

“Bray not, my Bardolf! Tell me, what of De Broham?”

“Dead, my lord! They stripped, they scourged him and hanged him naked to a tree . . . and thy noble hunting lodge . . . no more than ashes; burned it they did, Sire.”

“‘They’, Bardolf? What like are these that dared so much?”

“Rogues of Pelynt, lord, the Duchess’ men; I saw her red leopards on shield and surcoat.”

“And what of thy fellows, Bardolf? Fifty and five ye were besides De Broham; what of them?”

“All taken, Sire; all dragged away in shameful bonds.”

“Yet thou art free — ?”

“Lord, he that commanded for the Duchess gave me letter and bade me deliver it to none but thyself, — behold it, Sire!” And from breast of green jerkin, Bardolf drew a roll of parchment bound with silken cord whence dangled large, waxen seal. Slowly the King unrolled this parchment and having read the message it contained, sat plucking at his chin, until chancing to espy the falconer yet upon his knees, he sighed and spake:

“So thou’rt safe, my Bardolf, safe and all unharmed, not so much as a scratch on my behalf!”

“Sire, I . . . we were outmatched . . . I cried them quarter and they . . . they spared me, lord — ”

“So will not I,” murmured the King. “Ho, Sir Eustace, take now my Bardolf and let him be whipped

How John Talked with the King 13

somewhat, that he may grieve for himself, my goodly hunting lodge and for me. And so begone, nor let any trouble me until I summon with my little bell here."

So Bardolf was led forth, a man very deject and woeful, what time the King sat, chin on fist, staring moodily at the evening sunshine that flooded in through the narrow window. Presently, his gaze still abstracted, he beckoned John nearer and pointing to the letter bade him read it aloud; whereupon bending over the table, John read forth, and the words these:

"MAJESTY: A month since, one Arletta, a young maid of Swanscombe within my Duchy of Pelynt, was way-laid hard beside the Abbey of Holy Cross, by your Majesty's verderers and borne to your Majesty's hunting lodge, there to make sport for your Majesty's lord Warden and boon companion Sir Geoffrey de Broham. Since when she is dead. Three weeks since, her father, a worthy man of Pelynt, being my swineherd, ventured forth in quest of her. Five days since he was found creeping within the wild, maimed and blinded by the will of Sir Geoffrey de Broham, your Majesty's Warden aforesaid. Today therefore I have caused your Majesty's hunting lodge to be purged with fire and your Majesty's lord Warden, namely Sir Geoffrey de Broham, to be hanged that he, being thus totally dead, shall sin no more and be a warning to like ill-doers.

"Now therefore — should your Majesty leap to battle in cause so unworthy, know that within Pelynt our swords be sharp and I am, now as ever

"IPPOLITA OF PELYNT."

"Soho!" murmured the King, tapping the letter with long, sinewy finger, "here defiance trumpeteth, Bellona thundereth with clash of arms eager for war! Here's

blood and death, — how think ye, my lurker o' thickets?"

"That verily, sir, 'tis right valiant lady, this."

"Valiant — hum!" quoth the King. "'Tis a rampant Fury, a harpy lusting for slaughter, — ha, 'tis very plague in petticoats."

"And yet a very duchess, Sire."

"So I would she were dead or wed, for she is the disease doth blight my purpose of a people united from sea to sea, — a nation!"

"Ay, faith," nodded John, "and thyself lord supreme thereof. In sooth, High Mightiness, thou hadst been a right potent king ere now but for God and this so resolute lady —"

"God, sayst thou? Ha, will ye dare couple them, fellow? God is an Abstraction Universal, the Spirit Mysterious, the Eternal I AM; — this duchess no more than poor thing o' flesh and blood, a termagant hath destroyed my goods and murdered my Warden —"

"Murdered, Sire? Nay, good sooth, methinks this vile gentleman o' thine dies of a swineherd's daughter, the which, though a sickness unknown to Galen or Hippocrates, is yet passing deadly, 'twould seem, the same unworthy lord Warden being so 'totally dead', — the which is well enough save that, by reason of his roguish dying, others innocent must die also, belike, to assuage thy so kingly pride."

The King's sinister face darkened and he nodded slowly; quoth he:

"This shall depend on thyself, John o' Green. . . . Gape, man, gape an ye will but clack not; keep a still tongue and use now those ears! For mark me! Lord will I be of Pelynt, its every town, city and bailiwick, soon or late, by battle and storm or peaceful contrivance, by hard blows or cunning strategy. Now

How John Talked with the King 15

should it so befall the Duchess Ippolita were lost to Pelynt, so surely is Pelynt won to me. Well, John o' Green, I prove thee a bold fellow, 'tis said thou'rt also a man of wiles, very subtle and crafty; so do I grant thee four months of life wherein thou shalt, by force or guile, carry this proud termagant Duchess hither to me."

"I . . . I, lord?" stammered John.

"Ay, — do this and ask what ye will as guerdon. Howbeit, three days hence shalt ride for Pelynt."

"Alone, lord?"

"Alone, but with money sufficient and in what guise ye will."

"Oh, faith, Sire," laughed John, with rueful shake of head, "being neither god, demigod nor hero, 'twere meeter, on errand so fool-like, I were dight as fool with ass's ears adangle —"

"As ye will," nodded the King.

"To adventure me on quest so desperate, pitting my poor wit 'gainst all the might and chivalry of Pelynt —"

"Three days hence!" murmured the King.

"Fool were I forsooth, Sire, yet one that should cease from folly, of a sudden becoming wiser than the wisest by means o' noose or prick o' steel. And so, being neither a Thor, Hercules or Theseus I . . ."

"To win the Duchess Ippolita into my hands," sighed the King.

"Ha," laughed John, "wouldst have her alive, lord, or dead?"

"As may be, but attempt me this ye shall. Is it understood?"

"So well, Sire," answered John, frowning, "that needs must thou find other than I to thy so kingly purpose."

The King gestured towards the window.

"Fool," he murmured, "look forth."

So John crossed thither and peering down, behind the palace courtyard athrong with men-at-arms and in their midst his nine companions, and each with noose about his throat.

"Ha, lord," said John, blenching, "what wouldst with these, my poor comrades?"

"Hang them," answered the King, in his soft, passionless voice, "hang them forthright or hold them hostages to thy return. For, deny my will, John o' the Green and shalt die this hour in fashion most ungentle and these thy fellows with thee. But, set this Duchess Ippolita within my power and from thee and thy roguish following, from every outlaw and masterless man within the greenwood — yea, every wolf's-head of ye all — I will lift the ban of outlawry; and unto thee, moreover, will I restore lands and titles and John o' Green shall be again Aymery John, Lord of Morven, Athelney and Brackley Thorn, as aforetime. So here now is death to thee and thine or perchance freedom and honours, — choose thou!"

"'Tis choice, Sir King, evil as thy mission, for an I go yet bring thee not thy victim, how then?"

"A gallows!" murmured the King.

"And what of my nine fellows yonder?"

"Thyself in my power again, these poor rogues go free."

"And how if I be slain in this adventure?"

"Thy death in my service shall be life to thy companions yonder."

"So then," answered John, turning his back upon the little window and bowing battered head, "High Mightiness — I go."

CHAPTER II

How JOHN BEGAN HIS QUEST

HE was very young, most splendidly equipped and armed, yet very full of woe, for as he sat, the new-risen sun bright upon knightly hauberk, he made a groaning the while with dagger blade he defaced the painted blazon of his shield. Thus wrought he a while, then casting shield aside, he turned the dagger this way and that, staring on the bright blade with eyes wide beneath haggard brow until, roused by slow plodding hoof strokes, he started and glanced around. And thus he espied approaching at laggard pace a tall, bony horse that lacked an eye, a very unlovely steed ridden by a slim, shapely man hooded and clad in garments of fine, soft leather, neath which was wink of ring mail; slung before this man was a small lute or mandora, by his side a long, heavy sword; a fellow this whose grave, wistful eyes seemed at odds with his grim mouth that yet had a whimsical twist. The man checked his horse and spake in voice strangely pleasant to hear.

“Fair knight,” said he, glancing down at the defaced shield, “God give thee joy o’ this sweet world.”

“Fellow,” answered the young knight, scowling, “’tis a most vile world, ’tis very doghole wherefrom this my dagger shall presently free me.”

“Why then, may the saints and thy dagger speed thee to world better to thy liking and so, thou poor, fond youth, thou dolorous wretch and imminent crow’s-meat, fare thee well!”

“Fellow, I am spurred knight and of gentle blood!”

"Then I pray the crows deal reverently with thy so lordly carcass, yet I doubt it — for a crow is but a crow —"

"Hast a beastly tongue, fellow, and a fancy base."

"Yet 'tis tongue now waggeth a blessing on thy perishing body, and my fancy is to leave thee to thy murderous self."

"Fellow — hold! Who and what art thou — thy name?"

"Youthful Sire, some do call me 'John', others 'fool'; yet do I esteem myself but sorry rogue, being pledged to roguery. As to the 'what' o' me, I am a blown leaf upon the wind of Circumstance, a whirled twig upon the stream of Fate, borne I know not whither. But now for thyself, Sir Misery, — thou'rt pining lover and lately from the Duchess and Pelynt."

"Cog's wounds! Fellow, how know ye this?"

"Noble, youthful sire, thy shield yonder lately bore neath thy scutcheon the red leopards of Pelynt, methinks."

"Ah, verily!" sighed the young knight. "And this day my service endeth."

"Why, truly," nodded John, "for today, according to thyself, thy high-born flesh shall be no more than common clay to rot and rot — in fine, thou'll be dead."

"Dead!" muttered the youth, glancing unhappily from solemn John to gleaming dagger and back again.

"Dead and carrion, sir, unless 'stead o' dying a miserable boy, thou'rt minded to live and grow into a man — mayhap — somewhen."

"Bold fellow, dare ye mock me?"

"Young lord, not so. I'd have thee older and therefore something wiser and, being a man, die when ye must, in sort more honourable." Up sprang the young

How John Began His Quest 19

knight and fell pacing to and fro like one distraught.

"How," cried he suddenly, "how shall one dishonoured win back to honour?"

"Never," answered John, "except by honourable living. He that, dishonoured, slayeth himself, wrongeth himself that might himself have redeemed."

"Shall not such death, then, wipe out dishonour?"

"Not so, for the greater the sin, the more need of life to wipe out the evil by good works."

"Ha, and what — what call ye 'good works'?"

"Lording," answereth John, "he that hath relieved one soul's need, comforted one sorrow, waked one smile, hath not lived in vain, I trow. These and such be good works, methinks."

The young knight halted in his restless pacing to look upon John very earnestly; and John, sitting his tall horse, saw he was indeed very young and exceeding troubled. Now, even as they eyed each other thus, the knight bowed his head and throwing wide his mailed arms, spake with sudden, strange humility:

"Messire," said he, "what manner of man thou art that beareth gleeman's lute, carrieth sword like gentle man-at-arms, yet speaketh like neither, this I know not, yet am I minded to tell thee my grievous trouble, seeking thy counsel, an I may."

"Sir," replied John, shaking his head, "God made me what I was, my folly what I am; what I shall be, God alone knoweth, but such as I am is at thy service." So saying, he got nimbly to earth, tethered his steed and sitting on grassy bank, beckoned the young knight beside him, who, shaking head, took to his pacing again, yet presently spake on this wise:

"Messire, three days since I, that am Raymond Lord of Fordham Shene in Pelynt . . . killed a man . . .

and he a son of Holy Church . . . one Dom Gregorius of the Friars Minors!" Here Sir Raymond paused to stare at John with look of haggard expectancy. "Messire," said he in wistful, eager question, "wilt not shrink from me, then? Wilt not curse me for this holy blood?"

"Sir," answered John, rubbing at shaven chin, "all friars be but men . . . and some men must needs be killed, 'twould seem, — there was one Sir Geoffrey de Broham . . . But how came this?"

"Friend, I . . . I love and . . . was betrothed to fair and noble lady, Adelisa hight, that is the Duchess Ippolita's chiefest bower maiden and most loved companion and bedfellow. Not long since, at dead hour of night, the Duchess her bedchamber took fire, since when she hath changed her lodgement to the new wing of her palace on the hither side of the pleasaunce, and with her my lady Adelisa — "

"How came this fire, Sir Raymond?"

"Sir, it is not known, though my lady Adelisa voweth she espied the shape of one that crept furtive mid the shadows of the garden; whereat the Duchess but laughed and mocked, being of nature something bold and arrogant. Howbeit, since that time, I made it my wont each night to sit for an hour within the pleasaunce . . . and thus . . . alas, oh, friend, upon a night I beheld one that moved as by stealth i' the rose garden hard beside my lady's lodgement! So followed I, creeping as crept this dim-seen shape . . . and yet he heard me and turned and as I leapt, he grappled me. And in that moment . . . ah, God forgive me . . . I plucked dagger and smote and, speechless, he fell! . . . Forth of the shadows I dragged him where the moon played and saw at my feet the face of Dom Gregorius and

him . . . dead . . . the saints pity me! So fled I and, taking horse and arms, rode at speed, not cared I whither, meaning to slay myself, trusting to God His mercy. . . . And now here stand I, stained by this sacred blood . . . damned by Holy Church, a desperate man, being beyond hope — ”

“Ay, but,” quoth John, rubbing chin a little harder, “what should bring this same holy friar into the pleasaunce at such unholy hour?”

“Alas, sire, thereby is a little oratory wherein he was wont to pray a nights. . . . And now all’s told, so — an thou canst find compassion for such as I, speak me some comfort, tell me what I must do.”

“Hum!” quoth John, chin in fist. “What manner o’ man was this friar?”

“Sir, I cannot tell, save that he hath travelled and preached the world over, they say.”

“Was he of Pelynt, in the household of the Duchess?”

“Nay, he came thither out of the West, in the train of Lord Julian of Weare, a noble and something prideful knight that, like so many, wooeth the Duchess.”

“Out of the West,” nodded John. “Well, High Morven lieth westerly! But this Duchess, being fair lady and duchess both, shall not lack for wooers, I guess?”

“Indeed, they be enow and to spare. . . . But of myself now, what shall I — ?”

“Patience, sir! Of all these lordly wooers, which doth she most favour, think ye?”

“Why, none. She maketh a mock of all, of love disdainful. Ah, love! Oh, friend!” cried Sir Raymond, with despairing gesture, “My lady Adelisa is so white and innocent . . . and I fouled by this holy blood . . . am man accursed . . . lost, for ever lost!”

"Didst speak of this evil hap to thy lady or the Duchess?"

"To none . . . to none —"

"Ha!" quoth John, shaking grave head, "so shall thy flight peradventure make thee suspect, and this lord of Weare demand vengeance —"

"So were I better dead! For am I not damned? My dear lady for ever lost to me . . . a man sad and forlorn henceforth . . . a thing o' misery —"

"This," answered John, silencing his companion with a gesture, "this dependeth on thyself, thy lady and, in some measure, on one that would be thy friend, to wit — myself."

"How so? Speak, friend, speak!"

"Then, Sir Raymond, first, — thy dagger, aimed at night prowler, struck friar that prowled by night! Think on this, for herein shouldst find some small comfort. Secondly, I give unto thee this notable talisman!" Speaking, John reached forth and from adjacent bush broke a twig, whence he stripped all leaves save three, while the young knight watched in mute wonderment.

"Now," quoth John, twiddling twig between thumb and finger, "'stead o' dying dishonourably for thy honour, live for it and thy lady. But, since this dead friar shall doubtless make some stir awhile, and his friends and thy Duchess raise hue and cry for thee, spur hence north and west to Bracton Thicket, hard by Morven Vale, and ask for one Jenkyn a Thorn. Say thou wert bid to him by him he knoweth, in proof whereof give him this token. So shall Jenkyn make thee free o' the good wildwood where shalt lie secure from the avengers o' blood. Is't understood?"

"Yea, messire," answered Sir Raymond, setting the

three-leaved twig within the gypsire at his girdle, "but whiles I bide thus idle in the forest . . . what of Adelisa — my dear lady?"

"Content thee, sir, I will comfort her with news o' thy safety and contrive she get word to thee at Bracton —"

"Oh, friend!" cried Sir Raymond, his young eyes bright as the morning. "Good friend John, give me thy hand, for friend art thou in very truth. . . . And hast not lived this day in vain, for by thee I am alive and come out from the shadows of death . . . and methinks 'tis a 'good work', John. Now the saints keep thee and send I may one day serve thee in thy need. Howbeit, Raymond of Fordham Shene shall forget thee never." So they gripped hands, looking into each other's eyes.

Then Sir Raymond leapt lightly to saddle, saluted John with flash of sword and rode on his way.

But John sat there, chin on fist, brows knit, deep in thought, until at last his quick ears caught the stealthy rustle of leaves and, stirring not, he glanced up, hither and yon, neath bent brows and so espied a man peering at him from adjacent thicket.

John's dagger flashed from sheath and, holding it balanced lightly on open palm, he spoke, albeit his voice was gentle:

"Come forth, Hog-gob! Trip hither, Puck, or this i' the throat o' thee!"

The man's obedience was instant.

CHAPTER III

TELLETH HOW JOHN LEARNED HIM NEWS FROM WIGLAF A FOOL

A SORRY fellow of doleful aspect this who, capering on spindleshanks, made profound obeisance, louting full low.

"Sweet, gentle master," quoth he, posturing, "God save and keep thee from all harms, more especial in regard to such madcap innocent as I —"

"Innocent, forsooth," nodded John, "a long-eared, sly-creeping innocent, meseems, that peepeth furtive from bush!"

"Beau sire, I but peeped as peepeth timid hind or shy bird — to know an thou wert thing o' menace to be fled, or kindly soul attemptible — to be sued and wooed to small bestowal, e'en though it be no more than one silver penny. For messire, behold in me one Wiglaf, poor Wig a woeful wight, a wag o' wit, that yet so witless is that his poor belly crieth shame upon its emptiness. Alack, a needy fellow I, yet in my need here stand I the very man to thy need."

"How so?" questioned John, and sheathed his dagger.

"Gentle master, by thy dolorous visage, thy brow o' heavy portent, I judge thee beset by humours melancholic, so will I sing ye, dance ye, jest, quip or jape ye to jocund laughter and all for but one small piece of silver, bartering wit divine for base coin."

"Then, 'spite rueful visage, thou'rt a merryman?"

"Oh, noble master, I am Wit's Wonder, — jongleur, gestour, troubadour, buffoon and fool o' fools, these in

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one am I — yet go a-hungred! Oh, 'tis naughty world!"

"Whence art thou?"

"From bower and hall, town, city and village green, hither and yon, but lately from Swansmere within Pelynt."

"Hast thou seen Pelynt's young Duchess, this lady Ippolita?"

"Daily! Hourly! Good sooth, full oft have I, by my transcendental wit —"

"What like is she?"

"Very like a woman, beau sire, save that she is fairer than most. Red, red is she, snow and fire, a dame o' pride and passion, —"

"Lived ye at her court?"

"A year, my master, one fat and fulsome year, until upon a day — alas, the day — she had me stripped, whipped and driven forth, and this, mark me, sire, for no more than jape unseasonable upon a friar! A quaint conceit and rarely witty —"

"Ha — a friar?" quoth John.

"Nay, sir, my jape, my quip or quiddity upon this friar, this shaveling that, being stabbed, dieth not but maketh of his blood great profit."

"A friar?" repeateth John, rubbing shaven chin. "And stabbed? Mean ye Dom Gregorius?"

The merryman started back, eyes staring and mouth agape.

"Thou?" he whispered, pointing to the dagger on John's hip. "Was it — thou?"

"Not so!" answered John, scowling. "No stabber o' friars, I."

Wiglaf rubbed his head, rubbed his chin, winked, nodded and bowed, all in as many moments; quoth he:

"Pardon, sweet master, I did but bow at venture draw —"

"Tell me," demanded John, "speak and fear nought — what know ye o' this business?"

"Nought, good master, nought i' the world — save only that Friar Greg was stabbed or dagger smit, three nights since, i' the very seat of his devotions, to wit — the oratory —"

"How? Within the oratory, say ye?"

"Not I, my master, he — 'twas so *he* said. 'Struck by murderous steel,' quo' he, 'at the very altar.' And who shall say he speaketh lies? Not I, master, not I!"

"Struck down — at the altar?" repeated John.

"So affirmeth friar . . . though I, beau sire, chancing to walk within the pleasaunce i' the rose garden hard beside my lady's lodgment, did espy the sweet flowerets sadly trampled as by feet furiously a-striving — yet who shall say whose feet, which, what, why or wherefore? Not a soul!"

"And why, Sir Wary Discretion, should this friar crawl thither at night, think ye?"

"Night, sweet master, sly, secret night! Aha, 'tis season when creepeth gloating Lechery abroad or crawleth — black Murder! Now let him pronounce that may, for I, being no more than I am, know nought."

"Also," quoth John, musing, "but a little while since the Duchess knew a peril by fire; what knowest thou o' this, Wiglaf?"

"Wind, my master! A puff o' wind i' the arras, — the arras to flame o' taper and so — fire! And, mark me — all by reason o' the wind! And yet, an one dared so think, here was wind should ha' blown good to . . . someone, ha?"

“Ay,” nodded John, “to Fulk Fitz-Urse.”

“Or Limping Tristan, the King!” whispered Wiglaf leaning suddenly near. “Though be thou my witness, good my master, that I, being fool, know nothing and say less.”

“By reason, Wiglaf, that ye think much and suspect more.”

Now at this, Wiglaf glanced furtively round about and, coming yet nearer, stared into John’s face, viewing the steadfast eyes, the resolute mouth of him; then, nodding as if assured, spake whispering in voice changed as his look:

“Much do I suspect and much do fear for Pelynt and her Duchess . . . fire . . . ravishment . . . terrors by night . . . a waxing menace in the dark that creepeth ever nearer! Death hath been busy o’ late . . . men ha’ died in strange fashion hard beside Hangstone Waste . . . yet wherefore slain and by whom — or what, none may tell, save that this death was swift and terrible . . . torn and jagged as by claws o’ monster! There be tales of a great beast . . . an ogre . . . dragons . . . fell spirits. But who shall say? Not I; poor Wig knoweth nought and more-over — ”

Wiglaf stopped suddenly to shrink and peer with eyes of quick terror, for from somewhere upon this winding, forest road was ring and clash that told of mounted men coming at speed; a scurry of feet, a rustle of leaves and John sat there alone.

And presently was thunder of hoofs and mid billowing dust, the flash and flicker of steel where rode seven heavily armed men.

“Ha — thou!” cried their leader, reining up before John. “Saw ye ever a knight-at-arms riding this way —

a young lording, his escutcheon a falcon above the leopards of Pelynt?"

"Verily," answered John, "one such is ridden northwesterly to Bracton Thicket."

"Is 't far hence?"

"Four hours for such as know the forest, and ye are strangers, by your blazon. Also at Bracton and the woods thereby be many wild men, outlaws all that love not strangers, so, an ye adventure thither, there are ye like to bide or come hardly off — "

"Fool!" cried the Knight. "We be of Lord Robert de Gysbourne his following, so harm or let us that dare! On to Bracton Thicket — forward!"

"And so, Amen t' ye!" quoth John, whereat the knight turned to scowl and so thundered off, he and his six, in rolling dust cloud. And after some while John arose, but, in the act of mounting horse paused, as from amid the dense boskages that bordered the way rose a wild babblement, — prayers, cries, breathless supplications.

So John leapt nimbly up the grassy bank and, stealing in amid the leaves, flitted from thicket to thicket with scarce a sound, like the skilled forester he was, and guided by these dismal cries, suddenly espied two sturdy fellows, steel-capped and in shirts of mail, and between them on his knees Wiglaf the merryman, who writhed and choked, plucking at the strangling cord about his throat.

Silent and all unseen John leapt, smote down one man with the heavy pommel of his sword, dropped it and catching the second man in deadly wrestling grip, brought him violently to earth.

Half-stunned, the fallen man stared up to see a fierce face bent over him, a dagger point within an inch

of his eyes while powerful knees crushed the scant breath from him.

“Whose dogs . . . are ye?” a voice panted.

“Mercy!” gasped the man, flinching from the threatening dagger point.

“Whom . . . d’ ye serve? Speak . . . or go blind of an eye!”

“Piers . . . Lord of Deneholm . . . Oh, mercy —”

“And whom doth he serve?”

“The Black Bear . . . Fitz-Urse . . . Oh, pity . . . pity . . .”

“Loose off thy belt, rogue!”

The belt was off in a moment.

“Turn o’ thy face!” The man obeyed and John strapped his arms fast behind him, which done he turned to the other fellow, who yet lay witless and inert, and having secured him in like fashion, glanced up and about for Wiglaf, but the merryman had vanished. Then took John the hangman’s rope and therewith fast bound his two captives, back to back; quoth he:

“Thus do I save ye from further sinning a while, sparing ye life, for that a live rogue may amend and perchance die man o’ some worth. But now, should ye ever win free o’ these bonds, of the which I have some small doubt, — seek ye other master, for he that serveth Fulk Fitz-Urse, the Bear, serveth the devil. So be ye warned and, unless ye chance to perish here by hunger, do more worthily hereafter.”

Then, catching up sword, he sheathed it and deaf to the alternate prayers and curses of the two, strode back in quest of his horse.

CHAPTER IV

TELLETH HOW JOHN TOOK LEAVE OF THE BRETHREN OF THE GREEN

A NARROW track that led away between tall forest trees ever deeper into the wild, a devious way shut in by greeny glooms and depth on depth of whispering leafage, a track that became a vague path that dwindled, little by little, until it was not. But John pushed forward, guiding himself as only one skilled in forest lore might, and snuffed the air joyously, a well-remembered fragrance of earth and herb and warm bracken.

Thus rode he amid sweet twilight of cool, green alleys, shot athwart by golden beams of sunlight here and there, until, about high noon, he reached a glade where stood a great tree with massy, far-flung boughs, its vasty bole writhen and knotted with the ages, its rugged bark showing jagged fissures and gaping rents, into one of which he thrust hand, drawing thence a cord whereto a long bugle horn depended. Forthwith set he horn to lip and winded it right lustily, waking cheery echoes near and far. Thereafter, bowed in saddle, elbow on knee and chin on fist, in pensive guise, he waited mid the shade of the great tree.

And after some while in brake and thicket was a stir, a vague rustling, steel glimmered, faces peered, every bush had eyes; then, lifting right hand, John spake:

“Fair greeting to ye, brothers all!” and herewith he struck a resounding chord upon his lute. Then the little glade seemed full of wild figures, men hairy and

unkempt in rusty mail, in garments of skins, leather or ragged homespun, and from each and every rose shout of joyous acclaim; and loudest of all three:

"Why — 'tis John!" cried the first, a dark-haired, smallish very youthful-seeming fellow, who flourished bow tall as himself.

"Ay, by Saint Guthlac, 'tis our comrade!" roared the second, a black-bearded giant, striding forward.

"Welcome back to the kindly greenwood, John!" said the third, a lean, haggard, sad-eyed man. And then one and all they were about him, staring on him in huge and loud-voiced wonderment.

"Aha, John be back . . . John hath broke prison . . . hath 'scaped Limping Tristan's cursed gallows! Ha for our John a Green . . . !"

Now John's lean cheek flushed, his dark eyes glowed as rough hands seized his, while others clapped and patted him in right hearty welcome.

"Ay, but what o' t'others?" demanded the tall man, plucking at black beard. "The nine that went with thee, John, what o' them?" Answered John:

"Hearkee, good Watkyn and comrades all! I brake no prison — hither am I and alive but by will of Tristan the King —"

"Now, by the bones!" cried tall Watkyn, wagging head. "Here's very miracle, brother."

"Nay," said John bitterly. "He spared me but that I might serve him in certain purpose, a matter I may not tell, yet one I must needs adventure, lest he slay our comrades nine, for they do lie in peril o' noose — hostages for this poor body o' mine —"

Hereupon rose sudden fierce outcry with glitter of brandished steel:

"Ha, a rescue! A rescue! We'll with thee, John! We

do be ready and willing. Lead us, John, lead us!" So cried they until John silenced them with upraised hand.

"Alas," said he, "'twere vain, good fellows; the King holdeth them fast and he is mightily beyond our strength. So 'tis I must adventure alone —"

"Ha, then," cried the dark-haired, smallish man, his comely face flushed and eager, "fain would I with thee, I that was Walter de Benyon and now Wal, thy sworn brother-in-arms, 'tis boon I sue o' thy friendship, John."

"And I," cried the tall man, brandishing ponderous axe, his black beard bristling, "I Watkyn that was aforetime Vivyan Chand of Ler, also thy brother-at-arms, I demand it."

"And," said the haggard, sad-eyed man, hands crossed on the pommel of long sword, "I that am Thurstan the solitary, — I will take it."

"And I," cried a fourth, a stout, grey-bearded fellow, "that am no lording, but Jenkyn a Thorn and verderer to thy noble father and thee, my lord when follow thee I needs must."

"Faith now," quoth John, looking from one to other, "I am for the pomp and splendour of the Duchess Ippolita's court —"

"Ha, and we," cried tall Black Watkyn, scowling down at his tatters and rusty mail, "we show like so many rascallion trailbastons!"

"Methinks our outer seeming might be amended," sighed grave Thurstan.

"Nay, my brothers," answered John, shaking his head, "as poor gleeman go I, a mere singer o' songs such as few should let or stay, and riding alone thus I shall travel even safer, mayhap . . . And now — hearkee, comrades all, and wit ye well! From this hour

be ye all eyes, keep watch hereabouts but especially in the Debatable Land and on the borders of Pelynt, for the Bear is up and awake, Fitz-Urse is astir and this methinks bodeeth evil — ” Here again was wild uproar of fierce shouts and cries:

“Ha — say ye so, John? Death to the Bear! Oho, we’ll bait him! Down with Fulk! Death to black Fitz-Urse . . .” Until once more John silenced them with hand uplift.

“One other matter, good my gossips, and thou Jenkyn a Thorn — this day to Bracton Thicket by Morven, rideth a young lord for safe harbourage, bearing our cognizance of the three leaves, one Raymond hight, of Fordham Shene; foster and comfort ye him for his sake and mine till such time as ye get word of me. And so, all’s said — good comrades, fare ye well.”

But now the wild company pressed about him, calling upon him, each and every and all together:

“Nay, John . . . Ho, good brother, sing us ere ye go! . . . A song o’ farewell, John! . . . Nay, sing the song ye made o’ we! Ay, ay, the Song of Outlawry! Sing us, John, sing us!” And so, looking round upon them all, John plucked harp strings with skilled fingers and presently sang them his Song of Outlawry.

Sad sang John nor did any man stir or speak until the chords of his little harp had died into silence; then they clamoured for more, some pleading for the song again, some crying for song more merry. But John shook his head, slung the lute gently to his back and gathered up the reins of his unlovely-seeming horse; then:

“Room!” cried he. “Room for poor John the Glee-man!” And so, with cheery nod, rode he from them upon his solitary way.

CHAPTER V

TELLETH HOW JOHN MET A FRIAR, ONE HILARION

SOME hours' travel brought him into the Debatable Land, this grim solitude the which lay between the three powers, — High Morven, the rocky fastness of Fulk Fitz-Urse to the southwest, Pelynt to the southeast and the wide kingdom of Gerance to the north. A stretch of dreary country this, that had too often echoed to the shock and din of furious battle, glowed with the flame of burning town and village, rung with screams of death and wailings of forlorn misery; a desolation and very wilderness, yet where sudden death was all too frequent, even now.

And here the highway, no longer trimmed wide for the better safety of travellers, ran crooked and narrow between dense, intrusive underbrush, whence lurking Roguery might spring or smite unseen.

Here and there as he rode John espied the blackened ruin of some poor hovel or goodly farmstead and once he passed, stooping, beneath the out-jutting branch of a tree wherefrom dangled four, twisted, ghastly shapes that had once been human. And, as he rode through this cruel waste, John hated war more bitterly than ever.

Now turning a bend in this evil road, he reined up suddenly since athwart his path lay an ass very recently dead, for its blood yet flowed; a plump, well-cared-for beast, though poorly harnessed, and dead of a dagger that stood yet buried in its throat. Even

as he gazed wondering upon this animal, rose sudden fury of clashing steel at no great distance, and therewith screams and groans with deep, melodious voice that chanted prayers for the dying, albeit somewhat gaspingly.

John drew sword and, spurring thitherward, beheld a very tall, grey friar who battled with four men, a marvellous active friar who leapt and thrust, sang and smote, blow on blow, so mightily that the four, seeing John's great, bony steed rearing hard upon them, incontinent turned and fled. The gigantic friar made as to pursue them, but checked and, looking on John, reached forth his hand to bless, but — this hand was splotted with blood and grasped a notched sword that ran red from point to cross guard; and the friar beholding this, cried out and let it fall, and stood gazing down with eyes wide in horrified stare, for this bloody sword now lay across the huddled form of a man.

"Sweet Mother . . . o' mercy . . . dead!" gasped the friar.

"Indeed, reverend sir!" nodded John, pointing. "And yonder lieth another, very completely dead also. Dost wield potent blade, holy brother."

The tall friar groaned and falling to knees, threw wide his mighty arms and lifted agonized face to the blue heaven.

"Oh, pitiful Jesu!" he exclaimed. "Thou knowest I meant not this! Mother of Mercies — forgive! Two, Holy Mother, two dead by my hand, two souls sped to judgment all unshriven and . . . for one small ass! So, Holy Mother, intercede! God of Forgiveness, judge them not hardly, these twain. . . . But as for me — alas, alas, my sin is grievous and my guilty

tongue faltereth; therefore look Thou within my heart and know . . . *Mea culpa* — ”

His deep voice broke and he beat his breast with knotted, bloodstained fist. Now John saw him for comely man, albeit something past his first youth, whose face, though bowed in reverent meekness, wore a high and noble look; and presently, meeting John's friendly gaze, the friar reached forth hands in supplication.

“Oh, man,” cried he, “pray for me! Oh, brother, implore the gentle saints' intercession for me a sinner! . . . I . . . I that go up and down, preaching peace and brotherly love, am become once more a slayer of men.”

“I pray thee, good friar, how chanced this?”

“Alack, 'twas for no more than an ass, a poor, silly beast that must needs fall a-braying, whereat out on me from the leafage started yon poor robbers . . . they spat upon and beat me and this endured I in all humility; then one slew my poor beast with cruel steel, whereat I smote the slayer with my foot, the saints pity me! Then the Old Adam leapt within me and plucking sword from one of these poor rogues I, God forgive me — did so lay about me that, being woefully strong, I — ” here, pointing to the dead, he covered his face, while John watched him, chin betwixt finger and thumb.

Quoth he:

“And yet, good brother, this was in clean fight. And these were doubtless rogues ingrain, viler they than any beasts so ever — ”

“Verily, verily!” answered the friar. “Murderers were they, ravishers, men very bloody and without mercy, as I do know — nathless, have I sped them un-

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assoiled of their so many and deadly sins! So, fellow-man, pray God ha' mercy on me."

"Nay," answered John, "rather will I thank God for thee that can withstand six. The world, this woeful world I guess is the better for thy doing. Thus would I praise God for the might o' thee —"

"Not so," sighed the friar woefully, "for the strength of a man is a vain thing! And, moreover, the gentle Lord Christ preacheth ever meekness —"

"And yet, good friar, once in a while betook Him to whip o' small cords!"

Now at this the friar looked up at John eager-eyed, viewing him with new interest.

"Hast read the Scriptures — thou?" he questioned.

"Even so," nodded John, "and have learned therein that our Lord Christ came 'not to bring peace but a sword.' So be thou comforted."

"A sword!" murmured the friar and rising, stood a while in troublous thought; quoth he at last:

"Messire, I am a very humble brother of Saint Francis, a begging preacher, Hilarion hight. Pray now who and what manner of man art thou?"

"In sooth, Brother Hilarion," answered John, smiling, "here is riddle none shall truly answer, methinks, save God. For I am a man in the making, each day, each hour something better or worse, stumbling ever on in darkness, yet guided by the stars of Hope and Faith and Charity, and they call me John."

"Alas, friend John," sighed the friar, "I likewise walk in this darkness — nay 'tis a red mist wherein my stars do shine very dim — in especial the star of Hope!"

"Then follow star o' Faith, Brother Hilarion, faith in God, His good will towards this sorrowful world,

towards thee and thine own high destiny, since no creature liveth but to some purpose, I wot. So grieve not over this dead roguery; leave their souls to God and their rank carcasses to the wolves and seek ye how to aid and comfort the living — ”

“Nay,” cried Friar Hilarion, “how may I leave them thus shaming the very day, their dead eyes outstaring the sun? They shall be hid for that I may not bury them.” So saying, he laid the slain side by side, composing them decently, the hands of each crossed upon his breast; then taking the sword, began cutting bracken wherewith to hide them from the bright sun glare.

“Smoke!” exclaimed John suddenly, snuffing the air and glancing keenly about. “I smell smoke!” The friar, bending to his labour, nodded:

“Scarce a bowshot hence was goodly village once, my son, but ’twas ravaged and burned . . . folk do live amid its ruins even yet, such as be left of them . . . in dens, holes in the ground . . . like brute beasts, these that be children of God — ”

Even as he spake a woman appeared, a fierce-eyed, ragged creature who, espying the two dead men, uttered shrill scream of hateful joy and came running and belaboured them with the staff she carried until Friar Hilarion leapt thither, taking her furious blows on his own body.

“Woman,” said he gently, long arms outstretched, “harm not the dead; their souls be gone suddenly to God his judgment, so — hurt not their poor bodies!”

Now at this, the woman dropped her staff and wringing shrivelled hands, brake forth into bitter weeping:

“Oh, Friar Hilary . . . good Friar Hilary,” she sobbed, “we ha’ prayed the saints for thy coming these

many days. . . . And my little Wenna lieth direly sick and cries for thee, a doth. . . . But ha — for these dead beasts 'twas they and their like slew my goodman! 'Twas Rolf there dragged my Fenella screaming into the forest — ”

“And I,” groaned Friar Hilarion, shuddering, “I have sped them to God’s judgment thus weighted by their black sins!”

“And my little Wenna wails for thee,” pleaded the anxious mother, “my child needeth thee . . . and there be others o’ the folk sick and ailing . . .”

“Ay,” cried the friar, kindling eyes uplift, “I may yet serve the living, God be thanked! So, my sister, go thou and say I come with stores of herbs and medicaments to their comfort. Let them make a fire and boil water aplenty for my herbial infusions . . . thy little Wenna shall be better anon, please God.”

Then, while the woman sped away eager and joyful, Friar Hilarion covered the dead with pall of bracken, set the sword upright in the sod, like a cross above them and having prayed over them silently a while, came to his dead ass and began loosing off the two heavy panniers it had borne; whereupon down leapt John to aid him and together they hove and lifted, freeing the dead ass of the burden she was to bear no more; and the panniers proving heavy and cumbersome, John had them hoist to the back of his tall horse.

Now as they walked side by side, his steed’s hammer head above John’s broad shoulder, they talked together on this wise:

FRIAR: Sir, in this evil, most woeful world that yet, as I do think, the beneficent God meant for good and joyous world, 'tis right heartsome to meet with such

clement sympathy, for the which may God requite thee, my son.

JOHN: Holy Friar, in this good world that is evil but as we, poor, blind Humanity, so make it, 'tis right joyous thing to see Evil smitten hence and sin-blind eyes opened — e'en though it be by the bony fingers o' Death —

FRIAR: Nay prithee, peace — peace, here's small comfort to me, Jesu aid, to me that have slain my fellows two —

JOHN: And yet these twain, mayhap, are by way o' being angels long ere we.

FRIAR: How? And they such ill livers, their sins unconfessed . . . unshriven! So have I sent them through Purgatory head-long to hell — the saints pity me!

JOHN: Ay, but what matter for this, good brother, if by the hard road of a harsh purgatory and deepest hell they attain paradise somewhen?

FRIAR: Alas, alas, for such unshriven is the fire everlasting.

JOHN: Art thou more merciful than God?

FRIAR: Ha, such thought were blasphemy.

JOHN: Yet thou wouldst save these from the torment of God's vengeance, whereto — for a few years' sinning — thy God would damn them for ever and ever.

FRIAR: Nay, God's ways are . . . the ways of God.

JOHN: And God being Spirit o' mercy, so are all His ways merciful. The which is, methinks, but reason.

FRIAR: God is above all human reason.

JOHN: Nay, God, being omnipotent, is Reason! And man's deathless soul is of God, and no soul coming of God, though it be foul of a thousand sins and

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lost 'neath a very mountain of iniquity, but shall some day win back to God, sinful or no, since of God and from God man's soul cometh.

FRIAR: Alas, alas, here is blackest heresy —

JOHN: Yet mighty comfort to despairing sinner!

FRIAR: Nay, but, the Holy Fathers, Saint Chrysostom himself teacheth —

JOHN: Nay, brother, nay! These were but fellows finite, homuncules, sufferers and sinners, e'en as thou and I . . . And yonder is thy woeful flock, — God pity them!

For they had come forth of the woods, out upon a level that had once been a pleasant village green, but was now a desolation surrounded by the charred ruin of croft and hutment, dismal ruins and ashy mounds whence crept voiceless children, women and aged men in misery of want, sickness and rags, a timorous, silent company that started and peered at every step with eyes haggard by memory of past terrors, but who now, beholding them, cried out:

“Friar Hilary! Friar Hilary! Oh, good Friar Hilary, the saints bless thee!”

“Aha, Friar Hilarion, good brother,” quoth John, “think ye a merciful God hath no comfort in store for such as these, be they sinners or no? Yea, verily, I trow. Somewhere, somewhen, the woes and pains, the griefs and wrongs endured shall all be made up to them a thousandfold . . . for God is just, I guess, and merciful. Meanwhile, to their present comfort here be monies, — nay, take them, man! And now, Brother Hilary, an we meet nevermore, I am the better, having met thee. So, fare ye well!”

“Alas, son John,” sighed the friar, “thou art, I

fear me, a heretic damned . . . and yet . . . God made thee my fellow and so . . . grand merci for this rich alms . . . the kind saints plead for thee, and — fare thee well! And, in mine heart, friend John, is small prayer that we may meet again.”

Then John sprang lightly to saddle and, glancing back, saw the gigantic friar, a little child clasped to the comfort of his bosom, gazing after him very wistfully, the while, above those kneeling suppliants of his miserable flock, he raised one great, bloodstained hand in benediction.

CHAPTER VI

TELLETH, AMONG OTHER THINGS, HOW JOHN SANG AND A MAID LAUGHED

IT was as he watered his horse at a stream that murmured pleasantly between ferny banks that he heard it, — a woman's scream, sudden and passionate. John glanced about, shortening lax reins, then out flickered sword, in went spurs and his powerful horse reared, snorted and leapt through flying gems of spray and up the opposite steep.

And presently he saw her, a woman who strove with three men, a desperate creature who broke half-naked from their clutching hands to turn and front them undismayed and in one white fist the glitter of her ready steel. . . . Then came John amain with thunder of hoofs, long sword aloft to smite, but the three, staying not his onset, plunged into the denser green and were suddenly gone, crashing headlong through bush and thicket. So John, sheathing useless sword, rode forward, open hand upraised to seeming-dazzled eyes, as was the courtly fashion. Now, viewing her askance neath his fingers, he saw she was taller, younger than he had thought and of a stately presence, and in her look neither fear of men nor shame of her nakedness; only she shook proud head, veiling her bosom's splendour in the tumbling red-gold glory of her hair and so stood viewing him, sullen-eyed. And she saw him for lean, brown, shapely man, something careworn, who, glancing on her vivid loveliness, looked away as scarce heeding, and therefore she frowned.

"What would ye?" she demanded, quick-breathing. Answered John lightly:

"No more than ye would I should, for should ye fear I would that ye would not, then would I remove."

"God's light!" cried she in mellow voice, yet mocking. "What wondrous, wordful thing is here?"

"A man!" sighed John.

"How, but mere man, — no more?"

"More may not be, madam, for man, they say, is the noblest handiwork o' God."

"Oh, verily and indeed," quoth she scornfully, "three such noble handiworks would ha' wronged me but now!"

"Nay," answered John, shaking solemn head, "these were no men but rather creatures male, and therein lieth vasty difference."

"And thou, art not of their roguish fellowhood?"

"Must judge o' this thyself," he answered, "for were I indeed rogue, then, like all other rogues, I should protest myself very angel o' light. Thus, since to myself myself can be no witness nor trumpet forth the bright virtue, peerless honour and thousand noble qualities that myself possesseth, let thy two bright eyes bear witness for me."

Now, as she stood regarding him in no little wonder, John took harp and thrumming it gently, sang in murmurous voice:

"A man ye see,
Nay, verily
I'll vow a saint am I;
Since none be near
My vow to hear
Or witness an I lie.

“For here in earth
A man’s true worth
By tongue may ne’er be shown.
Tried he must be
His worth to see;
By deeds a man is known.”

“Howbeit, damozel, whatsoever I am, that am I that shall nothing harm thee; safe art thou — at the least from such as I, and, such as I am, mayst count thy friend — ”

“Nay,” cried she, “I fear thee not — nor any man!”

“Oh, most valiant, youthful dame,” murmured John.

“And to my defence here’s trusty friend — behold!” And she flashed her dagger at him.

“Why, then,” quoth John, gathering reins, “to thy friend and thee — farewell!”

“Ah, wilt begone — thou — man?”

“Damoze! most heroical, even so.”

“Wouldst leave me here — alone?”

“Nay, with thy friend.”

“In this solitude where danger lurketh and . . . am I not a woman — ?”

“There be evidence o’ this for such as have eyes.”

“Hast scarce looked on me.”

“And yet my poor eyes be dazzled all!” sighed John, whereat she laughed suddenly, yet shrinking instinctive within the shining mantle of her hair. “But,” continued John, shapely lips atwilt, “within thy woman’s body dwelleth spirit of such unlovely boldness, in thy port and gesture I read a valiance so virile, that whether thou’rt mortal maid or potent goddess o’ these groves is question debatable.”

Now here, scowling down at the dagger, she hid it.

"How an I be a goddess indeed?" she demanded.

"Then right humbly will I sue the blessing of thy kindly aid."

"And how an I be but merest woman?"

"Then would I counsel thee go hide thy beauty lest the bold sun scorch thee with his kisses."

At this she laughed again and, sinking down upon the grass, bowed shapely head, the while with nimble fingers, hid behind veiling tresses, she ordered her attire, rustic gown and wimple; then winding up her long hair she fastened it with jewelled clasp and looked up at John, who, from his tall horse, looked down on her. At last, with gesture imperious, she beckoned him and spoke:

"Light down, Messire, light down and let us talk, for I do perceive thy tongue, like thine eyes, is even sharper than methought."

"Nay, but," said John, glancing about them apprehensively, "how an yon rogues come back—and others with them?"

"They shall not dare; yet an they do—I have my dagger and thou thy sword. Come sit ye here and speak me who thou art, what, whence come, whither going and to what purpose?"

Answered he:

"John. A gleeman. From the north. Pelynt. To sing." Then dismounting, he tethered his horse and sitting down, viewed his companion with glance of speculation where she nestled against the rugged tree bole, head back thrown, eyes half-closed as in weariness or dreamful languour, long, slumberous eyes of blue wide-set beneath low brows and for all their seeming languour, bright and keen as his own. And after some

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while, finding him silent, she turned to glance on him and in her look a faint scorn; quoth she:

“Well, thou man, what dost ask of me? What fee wilt thou demand, what payment must I make thee?”

“Payment?” questioned John, opening his grey eyes very wide and rubbing square chin.

“Indeed,” sighed she wearily. “Having saved me from vile harms, how must I requite thee?”

John scowled, then laughed and shook his head.

“Tush and fie!” said he. “I traffic not in such little oddments, a bard errant I — ”

“How?” cried she, forgetting her languour. “A little oddment — this my body . . . my honour . . . my very life? Oddments, quotha?”

“Why,” said John, pondering, “mayhap ’tis shapely as women’s bodies go, yet compared with yon tree, or great and noble mountain, ’tis but a small matter, I wot. As for me — ”

“Thou?” quoth she, with scorn no longer faint. “Thou art a man o’ windy words, a very indifferent singer o’ poor rhymes and jingles, and all such be needy wretches; moreover, thou’rt a man and all men be avid creatures coveting somewhat.”

“Ha, Minerva is come to judgment!” laughed John. “Pallas Athena propoundeth! . . . And thou, child, so young yet so passing learned in men! Oh, maid o’ miracles! Woman o’ wonder! And yet, of men, a man is there like to gentle bird, to tender flower and this man — I!”

“A bird?” said she, frowning at him. “A flower — thou?”

“Even so, harsh goddess o’ wayward wisdom! Hark thou, mark thou, — prick up, stretch wide those two ears pretty and learn ye wisdom in a ditty.”

Then plucking little harp, John sang this:

“A bird remote sings sweet and clear
Though not a soul be there to hear,
Yet what cares he?
A floweret blooms although no eye
May e'er her fragrant beauty spy,
Yet nought reckes she.
Beauty and sweetness these dispense
With ne'er a thought of recompense.
Thus flower doth bloom and bird doth trill
Because 'tis so their Maker's will.
Wherein like bird and floweret shy
Is Rhyming John, and — John am I.”

“Thus of myself. Now of thyself tell, an thou so minded be.”

“What wouldst know, thou Jingling John?”

“No more than thou canst tell, as — thy name, thy home, estate, condition, loves, hates, fears, hopes, dreams, ambitions, in a word — thyself.”

“To tell all this should outlast the night,” sighed she.

“And the weather is fair!” saith John.

Now, at this she viewed him frowning and askance; and then, frowning still, made answer:

“Know then I am a maid, a creature of loneliness — ah, verily, in all this big world is none so solitary as I!”

“Content thee, wedlock shall amend this — ”

“Oh, man, dost speak like fool — without knowledge — ”

“So am I ready to learn, as — what do ye here thus remote within these leafy solitudes?”

“Forget awhile my solitude.”

“Paradoxical maid, how so?”

“By dreaming I am — other than I am.”

“By this I reason thou’rt somebody — ”

“Ay, truly!” cried she in sudden passion. “Slave am I, serf — thrall, nay, a poor creature to be hunted to loathed wedlock or slain!”

“Hum!” quoth John. “Wedlock or death! Here be two evils with a difference, for the one is soon over! . . . And yet a thrall, sayst thou, a serf? On that white throat I see no iron collar, no badge o’ servitude.”

“’Tis on my heart!” cried she, slim hands clenched on rounded bosom. “Here upon my heart!”

“The which is thing well hid from me,” he nodded.

“From all the world and so must ever be, — alas, poor heart!”

“Child, whence come ye?”

“From servitude I hate and yet must back to anon, for no child am I, alas!”

“Nay, thou’rt riddle beyond my poor wit.”

“Being a woman!” sighed she. “Ay — a very woman, to my woe.”

“And pray,” questioned John, staring down at the slender foot that gleamed so strangely white through its rustic sandal of rough tanned leather, “how doth thy womanhood irk thee?”

“For that life is so cruel and perilous to any woman in this evil world, in especial to one born a — ” Here, noting the direction of John’s gaze, she hid that white foot ’neath her coarse gown.

Quoth John, nodding:

“In very sooth, ’tis small and slim and marvellous white; ’tis foot at odds with thy so rustical habit — ”

“Folly!” quoth she, and frowned at him.

"Lady, indeed I — "

"Fond fool, here is no lady!"

"And thy so white foot hath hid itself!"

"Well, how now?" she demanded, for John had risen. "What would ye?"

"Eat!" he answered, and coming to his horse, took from cantle a wallet of promising dimensions.

"Eat, quo' he!" said she, in lofty scorn. "Spoke like a man, forsooth, that is creature of appetite and little else."

"To eat," retorted John, unbuckling the wallet, "is good for man, for beast, and for maid — more especially maid an she be aught peevish! To eat is man's (and woman's) duty to himself (and herself) and his (and her) neighbour. For he (or she) that is replete and full-paunched, is ever the readier to cherish and comfort all and sundry, to smile glad-eyed upon the day and take Fortune's buffets undismayed. Moreover, food is life's chiefest inspiration, lacking the which we perish and all our soaring ambitions and passionate purposes do vanish, alas, and are gone like smoke of long-dead fire! Food, — aha, good, lusty meat, 'tis the power universal, 'tis rare subject for poesy whereon I might make and sing thee notable good song — "

"Nay, spare me!"

"Not so, lady, for the Spirit of Poesy compelleth, as thus:

"The gentle radiance of those eyes
The balmy fragrance of thy sighs
All that in thee is fair and sweet
From beauteous head to pretty feet
All, lady, all thy beauty's pride
Is truly but meat glorified."

“So, come — eat!”

“Oh,” cried she in fury, “here is base, vile song!”

“Yet here too is cheese and bread, with neat’s tongue delicately smoked, very succulent and grateful. Come, thou’rt peevish and I’m an hungered, so let us feed!”

“Not I!” said she, with flash of bright eyes.

“Heigho!” sighed John. “Now stint thy pride, plague not thy paunch, lady, nor scorn to eat with poor John, for truly in this bread, this cheese, this meat doth lie tomorrow’s thou and I, the future us, the we that is to be. So eat, lest, since this meat meet is for song, song again I sing ye.” And then all suddenly she laughed, a sound very joyous and sweet to hear and, so laughing, reached him her two hands.

“Oh, John,” she said, “oh, Jingling John, hast won me from evil thoughts, from doubts and black suspicions. So whiles my troubles sleep awhile, feed me, John, feed me, for truly I am hungered even as thou.”

And thus seated together cross-legged upon the pleasant greensward, they ate and talked in right good fellowship, for now instead of frowns were smiles and in her eyes, sullen no longer, a youthful, laughing joyance. And presently, seeing how she plied small knife and dainty fingers, eating with hearty appetite, John took pinch of salt, scattering it between them; quoth he:

“Madam, lady, donzel, maiden, lass, child . . . how else may I now name thee?”

“Some do call me Lia,” she answered.

“Oh, rare!” cried John. “Lia! ’Tis name sweet as note o’ piping bird, it trippeth light as elf in twilit wood, and, best of all, ’tis marvellous apt for rhyming; ’tis name shall sing in line poetical anon. I would Pelynt’s proud Duchess carried one as sweet.”

"Oh, and wherefore?"

"'Tis to the Duchess I ride, with proffers of songful service — but — Ippolita! What brain shall scheme rhyme to such name? 'Tis difficult as the lady herself."

"What know ye of her?"

"No thing save by report that trumpeteth her fame to heaven for bold and warlike lady, right valiant and stout —"

"She soundeth like swashing termagant! Yet what more of her, I pray?"

"She is, they tell, red-haired, snow and flame, proud and passionate, in fine, such doughty dame that poor Jingling John must needs jingle his best in hers and his own behoof. And yet — Ippolita!"

"Red hair!" said Lia, frowning.

"Ay, and 'tis fighting colour and sorteth well with her nature, for —"

"And ye love not her name, fool John?"

"Fair Lia, no whit! . . . Ippolita! Hark to it! Verily 'tis neigh of horse, 'tis sneeze, 'tis hiccough, — and who shall rhyme to a hiccough?" Lia caught her breath, gazed on him a moment great-eyed, then threw back beauteous head and laughed peal on peal of joyous, bubbling mirth, while careful John, their meal ended, set back in wallet such food as yet remained.

Now presently her merriment subsiding, she sat clasping her rounded limbs in shapely arms, watching him thus busied, — his comely shape, the supple, hidden strength of him, his quick, sure movements, his lean dark face with its swift changes, — wistfully whimsical, dreamy and abstracted or grimly watchful. . . . And he was watching her now with his wry smile, wherefore she flushed; whereat John chuckled and she,

flushing rosier, frowned, lifted head with arrogant gesture and then, or ever she might speak, a woman's voice afar called:

"Lia! Lia!"

"One shouts thy name!" said John, for his companion had turned away and sat plucking at the grass.

"Indeed," she answered. "'Tis one I call 'Mother.'"

"Thy mother? Here i' the wild?"

"Nay, yonder in the mill."

"Mill?" he repeated, glancing about.

"A bowshot hence beside the stream," she explained and then the voice called again:

"Lia — oh, Lia!"

"Wilt not to thy mother, like dutiful maid?" asked John. "Come, let us go!" At this she turned to scowl at him, still plucking at the grass with petulant fingers, and now her vivid mouth and long-lashed eyes shewed more petulant than ever. Then the afternoon's drowsy hush was pierced by the shattering blare of a trumpet in sudden, urgent summons and, almost in that moment, John was afoot.

"Lady," said he, hitching at sword belt, "canst tell me what meaneth yon trumpet?"

"Bide and learn!" she answered sullenly, plucking yet at the grass. And almost as she spake was ring of arms and into this small, sunny glade stepped a tall, grim-visaged man upon whose mailed breast flamed the three scarlet leopards of Pelynt and who, beholding John, halted and laid hand on sword. Quoth he:

"Noble lady, of your grace who is this man?"

"Ha, Tomalyn," said she, scarce deigning the questioner a glance, "wherefore trouble me?"

"Lady, I am here and divers o' thy vassalage, with news of moment —"

"Then save it for some other moment — nay, speak, man, and ha' done!"

"But, gracious mistress," said he, gesturing towards John, "this fellow . . . who is he and what?"

"Nay, rather, tell me who and what art thou, Tomalyn?"

"Noble lady," answered Tomalyn, baring grizzled head and falling to knee, "thy Chief Forester, I."

"So wert thou in my noble father's time and with but fifty men to thy command; today hast an hundred, yet today, here in mine own forests, I am beset and mishandled by three lewd rogues! Well, my Chief Forester, how cometh this? Methought we had made of Pelynt a place where Innocence might walk all unharmed."

Tomalyn's head sank lower and he answered, sighing:

"Dear, my lady, I do my best, but o' late the world and Pelynt do seem direly changing . . . there bloweth a troublous air . . . I smell blood i' the wind . . . threats and omens. And this Dom Gregorius —"

"What of him, man?"

"He preacheth hard, lady, he goeth to and fro in town and country . . . and preacheth."

"Well, 'tis so his duty."

"Nay, but gracious lady, the folk begin to look askance . . . to mutter together —"

"Heaven's light!" cried she angrily. "Is it to plague me with such idle fancies ye sought me?"

"Not so, lady," he answered, shaking his head despondently, "'twas to say death had smit us again —"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, in hissing whisper, "who now? How . . . was it?"

“Osbert, lady, that bore thy noble sire’s banner when we conquered Fitz-Urse aforetime and withstood King Tristan’s might, — stout Osbert, lady, that was my friend. We found him hard by Hangstone Waste . . . rent by foul beast.”

“When was this, Tomalyn?”

“Last night, noble mistress.”

“Oh!” she cried, leaping nimbly afoot, “’tis place accursed!”

“Ay, verily!”

“How many have died there of late, Tomalyn?”

“Nine, lady, men these of high and low degree, yet all tried and trusty men of the Duke thy father’s following. Ah, would God the Duke thy father yet lived!”

“Nay, but his daughter liveth, man! I am alive and by God his light, men shall die for this right soon. So I charge thee — find me men to hang! Bring me rogues for my gibbets and soon, Tomalyn, I charge thee, or that head of thine shall answer. Ah, God, that such evil should be . . . and I here! Ay, I ran away a while, fled to my old Melisse at the mill to play at freedom . . . to dream myself happy, careless child again — and whiles I play . . . Murder leaps again. Yet . . . oh, to be a child once more!”

“E’en as I do mind thee so well!” nodded the grey-headed Chief Forester.

“Tomalyn, oh, Tomalyn,” she cried, reaching him her hand, “was I harsh with thee? Few are there left to me like thyself . . . and they dying, it seems . . . and in such hideous fashion! So be thou wary, look to thyself, for thee have I loved all my troublous days. . . . And now our good Osbert is dead . . . and a death so fearful! . . . He too was my playfellow . . . He shall lie in Pentavalon Minster . . . daily

shall they sing masses for the faithful soul of him . . . But for his murderers, they shall be found that I may hang them from our walls . . . Come, Tomalyn, let us go."

Rising, she took Tomalyn's ready hand then, pausing, glanced back at silent John across rounded shoulder.

"Art there yet, Sir Gleeman?" said she. "Get thee from Pelynt, for here anon mayhap shall be clash of steel 'stead of twang o' harp, so — away with thee, Jingling John."

So she left him, and John, staring after her, saw rise before his mind's eye, as it were, the shadowy vision of a gallows. Then, leaning back against tree bole, he took himself by the chin, wagging head as one in rueful dismay, until roused by touch from the velvety muzzle of his hammer-headed horse.

"Apollo," said he, as the unlovely steed blinked at him with its one good eye, "all's amiss, friend, for here is the noble chance of winning freedom woefully lost . . . 'stead of cruel outlawry — honours; 'stead of Tristan's shameful gallows — life, and some little happiness, mayhap. . . . For here, Apollo, here sat Pelynt's fierce and scornful Duchess . . . and I — sang songs!"

And after some while, he slung wallet to saddle and, mounting, rode slowly away; and ever as he went, before him loomed the misty threat of King Tristan's waiting gallows.

CHAPTER VII

TELLETH SOMETHING OF A MATTER TREASONABLE

THE setting sun made a glory of the stream that ran wide and murmurously shallow between reedy banks; and John was halfway across the ford when, roused from his gloomy meditations by jingle and stamp of hoof, he glanced up and saw three mailed horsemen watching him beyond the ford, sinister figures all, for their great helms were laced on and visors lowered.

“Ha, Messires,” saith John, reining up in mid-stream, “what would ye with myself? For weet ye well that I am poor mere gleeman.”

The midmost horseman, of form gigantic, tossed up ponderous lance and, catching it very featly, laughed and thereafter spake, his deep voice booming in the hollow of his great casque:

“Ho, John — ho, John; greeting and fair welcome to thee!”

Then visors were unclosed, the three came spurring and John looked into the cheery faces of tall Watkyn, youthful Walter and haggard Thurstan.

“But,” he questioned, glancing from one to other, “how come ye hither and thus equipped?” Answereth Walter, with gentle smile of fond recollection:

“By a singular good fortune, brother John, we chanced upon seven arrogant strangers at Bracton Thicket — ”

“Or they on us!” amended Watkyn.

“In fine, we ambushed them!” sighed Thurstan.

“The which seven,” continued Walter, “after some

small, bickerful debate, were fain to yield them unto our mercy — ”

“Though two died!” nodded Watkyn.

“And all something scathed,” sighed Thurstan.

“Moreover, I ha’ shaved mine beard!” quoth Watkyn.

“Peace, thou bald-face!” cried Walter; “suffer me word! And so, John, thus well bedight, furnished and armed in spoils o’ war, we spurred south, questing for thee, and lo, here behold us — to ride, fight, live or die with thee, brother.”

“Hum!” quoth John, chin in fist and looking on the warlike three. “Yet how shall honest gleeman and meek singer o’ songs justly consort with three such dogs of war? ’Twere out o’ reason! Yet right welcome are ye, brothers, for being fellows all of so desperate spirit, the liker am I, with ye at call, to achieve my purpose. . . .”

“Now pray thee, what purpose, John?”

“On my life,” answered John, scowling at his horse’s ears, “such purpose that whether ye come thus aidful by will of God, or wile o’ the Devil, I ken not. Howbeit, let us on and take counsel — ”

“Nay, first,” sighed Thurstan, “what o’ Walter’s captive, yonder?”

“How? Captive?” John demanded.

“Aha, I had forgot!” nodded Walter. “A tall gentle, gently armed, John, yet of manner dispunct and invective foul, that lurked expectant by the ford yonder — ”

“And ye waylaid him?”

“John, it hath been our wont so long to let and stay all and sundry i’ the wildwood, that the habitude sticketh and I was on him or ever I might bethink me of our altered estate — ”

"Now, here's base doing, Walter!"

"Granted, brother, and heartily agreed; howbeit — 'tis done!"

"God send ye harmed him not."

"John, save for buffet o' the mazzard, we used him right tenderly; he sitteth in yon green on grassy tuffet, of the goodly world regardant."

"Show me!" said John, and veiling face in his deep hood, he leaped to earth and tossed bridle to grave Thurstan; so down lighted Walter, humming cheery stave, and led in amid the woodland that bordered the road to where sat one solitary and fast bound to a tree; and this man had neither blazoned shield or surcoat and upon his head a great, heavy-visored helm.

"Sire," quoth John, hasting to loose the prisoner, "for this discourtesy we crave pardon." The unknown, muttering savagely, stood up, peering this way and that.

"My sword!" said he, in deep voice of a strange huskiness.

"Walter, dost hear?" Humming ever, Walter stepped behind adjacent tree and presently came bearing the weapon, which he tendered to its owner with exaggeration of courtesy.

"My bugle horn!"

"Walter, dost hear?" From beneath a bush Walter produced the horn, to have it snatched away, in which same moment the unknown, retreating suddenly, sounded shrill summons and so stood facing them, sword in hand.

"Aha!" cried Walter, "this bandog yelpeth to fellow curs, methinks, — better we slit his weasand ere they beset us —"

"Nay — hold off!" cried John; but even then was splashing at the ford near by, clatter of hoofs, shouts and the shock of fight on the road behind them.

Instinctively John turned thither and was tumbled sprawling by buffet of the stranger's powerful fist, who, laughing fiercely, smote Walter to his knees, leapt into the brushwood and was gone, but with Walter in eager pursuit.

Now as John, something dazed, sat rubbing his bruised head, to him strode mighty Watkyn and beneath his arm one who writhed, vainly kicking.

"Ha, John," cried Wat, "'tis accursed unneighborly country this, I wete, — for yon were Thurstan and I waiting for ye on the road, dreaming no ill to no man, when down on us spur three fiendly fellows, whereby I snapped my good lance, carrot-like; Thurstan's horse hath gotten scathe and I took — this!" and throwing his captive to earth, Watkyn set foot on him. "Ho, a vile country this, John!"

"What o' Thurstan?"

"Cherisheth his horse — nay, yonder he cometh. But for this base, murdering rogue, best end him, meseemeth, lest he harm other poor traveller," and Watkyn levelled sword at the captive, who squirmed and cried beneath his heavy foot. Then sprang John and putting by the thrust, scowled into Watkyn's scowling face.

"Let him up!" saith John. "Whatsoever ill assail us, 'tis ye yourselves have bred it, — let this man up, I say!"

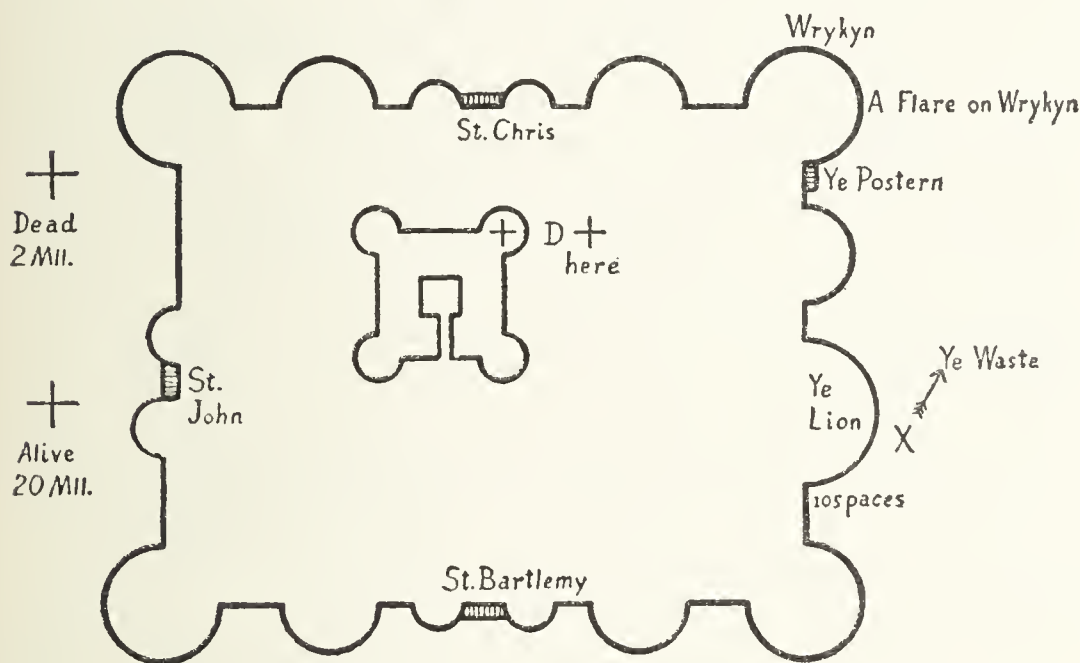
"Malediction!" growled Watkyn. "Though ye be John a Green, yet am I Vivyan Chand of Ler."

"So am I quit o' thy fellowship unless —" But here Walter leapt forth of the shadowy underwoods

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and leaning on sword to catch his breath, wagged head in self-reprobation:

“The dog outran me!” he panted, “yet had I one stroke — at him and — shore away his gypsire — and nought in’t for my labour — save this!” and he gave John a piece of parchment whereon was drawn a diagram — thus:



“And right clerkly done!” quoth John, scanning this parchment closely in the failing light. “Watkyn, set steel again to yon fellow’s throat, and smite an he speak not.”

And thus, while the cowed wretch stared up the long blade to the implacable, helmeted visage above, John questioned him:

“What know ye of him that bare this parchment, the unknown in plain harness that summoned thee and thy fellows with moot of horn?”

MAN: No thing, good Messire, by Holy Rood I swear.

Thrice only have I seen him and ever with his visor shut — and oh, good my lord, let them not slay me.

JOHN: Know ye the Hangstone Waste?

MAN: Yea, master.

JOHN: What see ye there o' nights?

Now at this, the man shivered, speaking not.

JOHN: Prick him to discourse, Wat.

MAN: Ha — flames, flames, master, and fires o' hell.

JOHN: Ay, so! And in these flames, what stirreth?

MAN: Fiend and goblins damned.

JOHN: And what beside? Prick him, Watkyn.

MAN: The Beast . . . the great Beast that claweth.

JOHN: What like is he, this beast?

MAN: Lord, I know not. I did but blink it once by
light o' moon and hid me i' the marsh.

JOHN: Hast seen it at work?

MAN: Nay, master, I have heard it . . . once.

JOHN: What heard ye?

Now here this man's face ran sweat and he shivered, not all by reason of the sword point at his throat.

JOHN: Prick him, Watkyn.

MAN: Ah my lord . . . one screamed . . . mortally.

JOHN: Where in this waste saw ye this clawing beast,
these fiendly shapes?

MAN: Hard by the Hanging Stone, good sire.

"Now fellow — hearkee!" quoth John. "Get ye unto them ye serve and say there be fiendly goblins, new-come, a-creep towards Hangstone, that shall outfiend all other fiends and goblins soever. Say that this Clawing Beast shall be met claw for claw, and when Lion roareth, he shall be heard far as High Morven. And now — up, rogue, and be suddenly gone — away!"

Hereupon Watkyn removed his heavy foot, kicked the captive to his legs and slapped him heartily with flat of sword as, without a backward glance, the man sprang into the leafy shadows and fled in headlong career.

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"Nay but, sweet brother," questioned Walter, "what dost mean by this talk o' fiends and clawsome beasts, this roaring o' lions and cetera?"

"In faith," answered John, frowning down at the drawing in the failing light, "I would I knew, — 'twas spoke but by one rogue to another, in matter o' roguery, and shall perchance give other rogues to think, I guess. For, brothers all, hereabouts in this fair Duchy is black work afoot — heigho! Now tell me, Walter, spied ye aught about yon lusty fellow that smote us, whereby we may know him again?"

"Ay, by the Rood, this did I, John — he lacketh the top joint of his little finger. Aha, I'll know him again and when next we meet, an the sweet saints prove so kind, old Guttler here shall rive his liver!" and Walter slapped the hilt of his long sword.

"The top joint of his little finger!" nodded John. "Which hand?"

"His left, sweet brother, his left. I saw 't plain, for his mitten slipped and hung a-dangle — ay, I'll know him an we meet."

Very thoughtfully John rolled up the parchment drawing, set it carefully in the pouch at his girdle and turned back towards the road.

"Tonight," said he, musingly, "the moon is nigh full and I'm fain to look on this Hangstone Waste."

"Ay, but — wherefore, brother?"

"For that 'tis devil-rid, as ye hear. Now I have never seen goblin, spirit or dæmon in all my days, Walter."

"Perchance hast not the eyes for such, John; some ha' the sight and some not."

"Hum!" quoth John.

"Ha," growled Watkyn, "and wherefore meddle wi' such, for goblins and dæmons be no honest company for no man!"

"Nay, by Saint Walrond," laughed Walter, "to hunt a dæmon promiseth some joyance. I lust to try my good lance; moreover, I have my bow —"

"Tush, thou Wal-fool," snarled Watkyn; "how shall mortal weapon avail 'gainst spirit that is but a shade?"

"Peace, thou massy Beef! Howbeit, 'twere right fair venture to joust with a ghoul or wing a goblin."

WATKYN: Hold, thou Sparrow-wit.

WALTER: A fico i' thy maw, thou cumbersome shog!

WATKYN: Ha, rouse me not, mannikin, lest I hang thee to my girdle for a fly-flap.

WALTER: Be defied, thou Bulk!

WATKYN: Now by my head, I vow to —

WALTER: Fie, fie, Bladder-pate, swear by thy vanished beard . . .

But now, or ever tall Watkyn could find apt retort, came they to the road where Thurstan, more sighful than ever, comforted his wounded horse as well as he might.

"Is he able, think ye?" questioned John, peering at the animal's hurt.

"An we gentle him!" nodded Thurstan. So, being mounted all, they rode on very slowly, Walter and Watkyn behind, knee and knee, wrangling together as was ever their wont, until, reaching open country, John drew rein and pointed away across down-trending, velvet slope and wide, lush valley to where afar, high-throned above this pleasant vale, all glorious with sunset, rose the mighty walls and bastions, the embattled towers and frowning turrets of the famous city called Pentavalon, brooding stately over fertile vale, goodly village and tree-shaded, sleepy hamlet, like a grim yet kindly giant.

Now as he gazed upon this city, John saw a cloud above it that grew and grew, seeming, to his entranced

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vision, like a monstrous, clutching hand forth-stretched in stealthy menace against the many lives therein and, more especially — one; now, remembering his mission, he was filled with a fierce self-hatred, wherefore he turned from the city to look very wistfully on the valorous, steel-girt faces of his three companions, this intrepid three, and spake them on sudden impulse:

“Good my comrades, though outlawed man and nameless, I wit ye well for lords of gentle blood, all three. Now is there ever a one of ye hath had knowledge and acquaintance aforetime of the Duchess Ippolita of Pelynt?”

“Not I,” answered Watkyn; “my good castle of Ler stood far north.”

“Nor I!” said Walter. “Born mid ruin and bred to strife I, i’ the Debatable Land.”

“Ere I wed me wife,” sighed Thurstan, “and gat me children — sweet babes snatched from me by bloody Fitz-Urse, I lived one of Duke Robert’s pages and saw full oft the little Ippolita, his daughter. Since when fifteen weary years ha’ sped — ”

“Ha, sayst thou, Thurstan! Then, comrade, I charge thee ride unto the Duchess forthright, win speech with her by memory of past friendship — proffer her yourselves and good swords, for ’spite yon high walls and ’battled towers, she lieth in dire peril, as I do know. . . . Roguery creepeth upon her ever nearer, to betray her to prison and — death belike. So be ye wary, one and all; find ye some hostry together, ward ye the Duchess how ye may . . . watch over her until I come — ay, and after . . . I’ll with ye soon. But for now, until we meet, God speed ye well!”

So saying, John spurred his powerful steed to sudden gallop and thus left the three gazing after him in no little wonderment.

CHAPTER VIII

TELLETH OF ONE MALD THAT WAS A WITCH

SHE was a goosegirl that drave her cackling flock homeward through a fragrant dusk and sang to herself sweet-voiced; but seeing John approach, she grew dumb and made him demure curtsey with up-glance of bright eyes as he reined in his horse beside her; and because of the gentle smile on his strange, whimsical face, she smiled also and made her reverence with a lowlier grace.

"Sweet child," saith John, "I pray thee point me whither away lieth the Hangstone Waste?"

"Ah, gentle master," she answered, her smile fading, "scarce a bowshot hence is Saint Wynan's hermitage and beyond this, a track shall bring thee thither by Dickerdyke Wood and the Mere. But oh, good master, go not there, for 'tis an evil place, they say!" And she made a cross in the air with one small, sunburned hand.

"Grand merci for thy warning, sweet Pastorella; may good angels go ever with thee."

"And with thee also, good master. But my name is Brynda."

"Then sing on, Brynda, life is sweeter and this world the better for thy song —" But now and even as he spake, up from the fragrant meads came a tall man shrouded in dingy, tattered cloak, who, peering at them from shadowy cowl, passed on with long strides, his sandalled feet silent in the thick dust.

John, yet gazing after this sinister figure, felt a

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hand tug at his stirrup and, glancing down, beheld the maid Brynda cowering against his horse's flank, staring after that sombre, stealthy shape with eyes of such terror that he reached forth his hand in comfort.

"What now, child?" he questioned.

"The Hermit!" she answered, shivering, "yon goeth the Hermit of St. Wynan's. Three weeks ago he first came thither, none knoweth how or whence and . . . oh, good master, he frighteth me. . . ."

"How so?"

"He peereth at me from bushes . . . Thrice hath he followed me o' late. He is like spirit of evil!"

"Hum!" quoth John, looking down into the wide innocence of her troubled eyes. "And yet hermits be ever esteemed holy men that pass their days in prayer and fasting."

"Why, this one prayeth by day, for I have spied him. But by night he stealeth abroad, for Nym hath seen him. Nym is oft astir whiles the world doth sleep. . . . Oh, list ye now, shalt hear his horse's bells where he cometh yonder!"

"And pray, who is Nym?"

"The charcoal burner, master, and my kind foster father, — see, there he is!" Glancing whither she pointed, John beheld a stalwart, grimy fellow who plodded towards them up the slope beside his shaggy horse and who, at sound of Brynda's clear call, looked up and mended his pace.

"Oh, Nym, Nym," said she, as he halted to lean upon his heavy quarterstaff and survey John beneath thick brows, "Nym, tell now what ye do know of St. Wynan's Hermit."

"Nenny, lass," he answered in hoarse, grumbling

tone, "I be only Nym the charcoal burner, as burns his coal and minds his business; no talker never be Nym."

"Friend," quoth John, "in friendship speak and fear not."

The man peered up into John's downbent face and lifting coal-black hand to blackened brow, bent stalwart back in humble salutation.

"Lord!" said he.

"Nay now," laughed John, "an humble gleeman I."

"Howbeit, master, I wit ye well for none o' the common sort, for, years ago ere I crept me, sore stricken, to the strong harbourage of this Duchy, I lived nigh unto Morven Vale."

"Ah . . . Morven, sayst thou?" murmured John.

"Ay, lord, but this was long and long since; today I burn me charcoal in Pelynt. But thou? There's that about thee stirs memory!"

"Then let it slumber, friend, and think me no more than I seem, a poor singer of songs, God wot."

"Oh!" cried Brynda, clasping her pretty hands, "good master, fain would I hear thee sing."

"Not so," quoth Nym, "night falleth apace, so get thee home to bed, lass."

"Yet first," saith John, reaching for his little harp, "by thy good leave, friend Nym, sith Brynda must bedward with the flowers, so will I sing her lullaby." And forthwith, striking sweetly murmurous chords, John sang softly these words:

"See how the gentle Night doth creep
To hush and kiss the flowers asleep
Whiles the fond wind with murmurous sigh
Singeth them Lulla-lullaby.

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“Come, Sleep, with stealthy, silent tread
Bless with thy kiss each weary head.
Come, blessed Sleep, the day is ending;
Kind Sleep from God himself descending;
Angel of God, come down and bless
God’s children with forgetfulness
Of sin and pain and every sorrow,
That these shall lighter seem tomorrow.
Give to us blessed dreams, that we
May so awhile perfected be,
And, thus inspired, shall greet the dawn
With valour high and hope new-born.
So come, thou Angel, hither creep,
Come down to all, Oh, blessed Sleep,
And, whiles we in thy bosom lie,
Sing us soft Lulla-lullaby.”

“And so, get thee home to bed, lass,” quoth Nym,
“and in thy praying, pray thou for me.”

“And for me also!” sighed John.

“Oh, I will, I will!” she answered fervently, looking up great-eyed into John’s wistful, smiling visage; and so, with graceful reverence, she went her way, the geese cackling before.

“Dwelleth she far hence, Nym?”

“Scarce three arrow flights . . . and as for she — hist! There went noble blood to her making; she was begot in Morven Vale — ”

“And hereabouts is a hermit that frights her!”

“So shall I crack his sconce an need be. . . . But now,” said Nym in harsh whisper and looking very earnestly on John, “now, by thy singing, do I know thee past all doubt for Aymery John, only son to thy noble father that was Lord of High Morven ere the traitor Fitz-Urse smote and slew him in his slumber — ”

"Twelve weary years ago!" murmured John. "And I overseas, learning the wonder of books!"

"Aha, lord, better hadst loved books less and thy sword more. Howbeit, since thy father was my liege lord, so am I thy man today, Lord Aymery, to march with and fight for thee . . . an I must."

"Nay," answered John, "better thou burned thy charcoal and I sing my songs than foul the world with more blood. So, to thee and all other, I am poor John a Green and ask no service o' thee, Nym, save words."

"Then speak, noble Lord."

"I pray thee name me not so."

"So be it, master."

"Then what know ye of this Hermit of St. Wynan's?"

"Go 'long wi' me a piece, master, and I'll tell 'ee."

So saying, Nym turned aside down a narrow leafy track and John followed whither he led until they reached the twilight of a little glade. Here John dismounted and tethered his horse, whereat Nym shook shaggy head in gloomy disparagement.

"Alack, master, you that was wont, I mind, to go right proudly horsed, 'tis sorry nag yon!"

"And I call him Apollo, my Nym. Yet he hath his points. . . . Knowst thou the Hangstone Waste?"

"Like my hand, master."

"Good! But first of this Hermit?"

"Well, first, I've seen him in talk wi' the Witch ere now; ay, master, wi' Mald the fiendly Witch, can cast ye spells so potent can turn a man to cat, or rat, or howling dog, I've heard."

"Hast ever seen any man so transfigured, Nym?"

"Why, no, master, no — yet I've heard tell o' them as hath."

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“Troth and so have I. But this Hermit, what of him?”

“Well, master, three nights since, deep i’ the woods along by Rakenham Oaks, nigh to Hangstone Waste, I stayed to tend my fires, and heard me stir and flurry wi’ sound o’ voices and hid me in hollow tree I wot of. And, the moon being full, I spies me men five, four bearing one that was dead, and the fifth man and chief — this Hermit. Now, master, this dead man was very dead and right evil to behold, for he had no face, all ripped and tore it was.”

“Ah?” nodded John. “And you saw this very plain?”

“Too plain, master.”

“Talked they, these men?”

“Ay, they did so, of a bear somewhat.”

“Spake they any names?”

“Ay, by the Rood! ‘Fitz-Urse’ says one. . . . Fitz-Urse, Master John, mark ye! Whereon this same Hermit clouts him to silence, — ’twas then I spied his face i’ the moon. And so they were gone, bearing their dead man . . .”

“Went they Hangstone Waste toward?”

“Ay, thither.”

“What knowst thou o’ this same place, Nym man?”

“Nought but evil, master. ’Twas an ill place aforetime at any time, but worsen o’ late, by reason o’ devils and hellish fires. They tell, too, that ’tis haunted o’ the dead and damned. Ay, and moreover I’ve heard as folks ha’ died there o’ late right woefully and moreover — ” Nym snatched quarterstaff and leapt nimbly afoot as came stealthy rustling hard by and forth of the leafage crept a bowed, misshapen thing that whimpered and spake:

"Harm me not, for I be hurted sore . . . dogs and men . . ."

"Off, accursed dam!" cried Nym, twirling his quarter-staff so fiercely that the dolorous thing cowered and sank, whimpering upon the sward.

Then up started John and, putting Nym aside, came quick striding, for he saw this woeful creature was an aged, white-haired woman.

"Cog's body!" gasped Nym, in tone of horror. "Back, master, back for thy sweet life's sake! Stand away — 'tis Mald the fiendly Witch! Touch her not, lord, lest she blast thee to lewd curdog — ha, beware!"

John crossed himself instinctively but, peering close, saw this dread creature so feeble and distressed that he knelt and lifted her gently within his arm.

"What aileth thee, poor soul?" he questioned, putting by the silvery hair that streamed so long and wild about her. Now at this she stared up at him with eyes large and fiercely bright, set in a face that might once have seemed beautiful; silently she viewed him, an eager searching gaze, and when at last she spake, it was in tone of wonder and voice so strangely soft and clear that John wondered also, for now her speech was not of the common folk.

"Eh, Sire, who art thou dare show mercy on witch accursed?"

And John answered, "One that had a noble mother and would honour all women therefore."

"But yon fool Nym hath named me right. Mald the Witch am I."

"Yet art thou woman also, old and meseemeth desolate. And so, for my gentle mother her sweet sake, how may I aid thee, Mald?"

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Now at this, Nym groaned amain, crying:

“Beware, lord! Oh, good master, beware lest she sudden blast thy good flesh, rive thy very bones —”

“Peace, Nym man! See this dread witch fainteth, and how shall witch aswoon work ill to any? Go fetch me water from the rill babbleth yonder.”

“Alack, Master John, this I cannot. Lord, I would fight and die for thee, God wot; but succour this foul witch I dare not . . . for she hath been banned, accursed, doomed and damned by Holy Church.”

“Why, then,” said John, lifting the swooning creature on his breast, “needs must I bring her to the water, so fare well to thee, Nym.”

“But, good master,” groaned Nym, retreating as John advanced, “how an when she wake she cast some black spell on thee — ah, woe!”

John paused and instinctively crossed the fingers of his dexter hand, though furtively, then shook his head.

“Nym,” he answered, “no thing of such like evil may touch me, for though I bear accursed witch thus upon my heart — yet aloft there in high heaven is watching an angel that was my mother. So get thee gone, Nym, and leave this woeful witch in my care, and me in the holy care of my angel mother.” Then, while Nym stood afar, muttering hoarse prayers, to the brook came John and there ministered to the swooning creature until she sighed, moaned, waked from her faint and seeing John, strove wildly to win free of him, crying:

“The bandogs . . . they nigh had me once . . . ah, give me not to the dogs!” Now, with voice and touch, John soothed her to such comfort that she lay still a while, staring up at him neath scowling brows with her fierce wild eyes.

“A hound . . . bit me!” said she at last.

"Ay, I know, I know," he answered. "So have I tended thy hurt — lo, here!" Now, looking from John's neat bandage to his lean and kindly visage, she very suddenly broke out into a strange fury of weeping, a passion of tears so wild and terrible that he sat all astonished and knowing not how to comfort her, was dumb. And when, hushing her grief, she contrived to speak, it was in sob-broken murmur:

"No hand hath dared touch me, no heart dared comfort me, no soul dared come anigh me, since Dom Gregorious proclaimed me accursed and excommunicate."

Now as she spake, her fierce bright eyes were dimmed again and softened to beauty by slow-gathering tears, but even as they fell she laughed harshly.

"Oh, man," cried she, "thou man that fearing, fears me not, behold a witch that weepeth even as any other old, sad woman might . . . 'tis a fount methought long dry and yet welletth now to the sonlike mercy o' thee. So would I bless thee an I might . . . but this I dare not for thine own sake . . . Ha, stand away, none must see thee come anigh me, for he that comforteth witch accursed must be damned and outcast also."

"Now God and His saints bless thee, Dame Mald!" quoth John. "For I wit well that witch can shed such tears as thine, no witch is but very woman. Come now, yonder is my horse shall bear thee — " He fell dumb as, sudden and near, rose the dreadful, eager whining of a hound and then a man's fierce hunting cry.

"Oh, again! Mother o' Mercy, aid me!" gasped Mald, scrambling afoot. "'Tis Robert of Gysbourne hunteth me yonder . . . his hounds nigh had me afore and now . . . they ha' winded me again — "

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"Nay, comfort thee!" said John, rising. "No man never shall harm thee whiles I may withstand him."

"Fear?" she cried. "I do fear me no man, for these ha' sense to fear me; 'tis the senseless brute dogs I may not abide . . . " The words ended in whimper of terror as into the little glade broke two men with a great hound leashed and tugging.

"The scent groweth hot, Tyb!" cried one cheerily.

"Ay, lord," answered the other; "the curst hag should be near — "

"Yet no nearer!" quoth John, stepping forward to peer, for the light was failing.

"Who speaketh?" demanded the first man, fiercely arrogant.

"One that, speaking, bids ye hence forthright," answered John, hitching at his sword belt.

"Fellow, stay me not, — room, I say. Ha, never dare me, rogue; I am Robert, lord of Gysbourne."

"Why then to Gysbourne begone, — avaunt thee, Robert!"

For a moment this so arrogant lord seemed hardly to believe his ears; then:

"By the holy Nails!" cried he. "The fond fool dareth me! Let slip me the hound, Tyb!" But, even while he spake, out flickered John's long sword and, as the powerful animal leapt, his deadly steel met it in full career and the stricken beast, nigh shorn asunder, yelped, snarled and was dead.

"Alack!" quoth John. "So dieth goodly beast at bidding o' fool master."

"Par Dex!" cried Lord Robert in bitter fury. "The base knave hath dared slay my noble hound! Ha, death — death! Thy steel, Tyb . . . with me now, — death on him!"

Staying not for their attack, John leapt to meet them with dagger poised and sword whirling; so there amid the shadowy leafage was furious clash of meeting steel.

But as John, thus fiercely beset, plied his weapons, point and edge, into the fray leapt sturdy Nym, so suddenly and smiting with long, heavy quarterstaff so dourly that the assailants, much dismayed by this unexpected onset, quailed and gave back.

"Tyb man . . . ha, Tyb . . . what's here?" gasped Lord Robert.

"Witchcraft, lord . . . fell magic and . . . the fiend! Away lord . . . away ere we be devil-smit. . . ." And thus, very presently, they were gone.

"And so," panted John, leaning on his sword, "my thanks on thee, Nym."

"Ay . . . by Saint Cuthbert," growled Nym, "there shall few abide thy good sword and my staff."

"Nenny, man!" laughed John. "Yon twain, that run so fleetly, run not so much from us as from fear of a witch's magic. By this time tomorrow we shall be very fiends and spirits by their accounts, thou and I, conjured up to her defence by Dame Mald's black arts . . . the poor soul!"

So saying, John sheathed his weapons and coming back to the little rippling stream, began to peer about; yet search where and how he might, he saw no one, for Mald the Witch had vanished very witch-like.

Now as he stood thus, glancing hither and yon, from the shadows hard by a vague shape swooped towards them, hovered, wheeled — and was gone; whereat Nym crossed himself devoutly, then grasped at John with shaking hand.

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“Saw ye yon fearsome thing, master?” he whispered.

“Ay, an owl, Nym.”

“Nay, here was no owl, lord! There went thing that, seeming owl, was she ye would cherish, — yon fiendly haggish Mald. Come away!” Scarce had he spoken than from the gloom, deepening about them, rose a sudden dismal hooting. “There!” gasped Nym. “Holy Saint Cuthbert . . . she cometh again! Ha, beseech thee, master, let us away.”

Being come where their horses were tethered, John mounted and looking down into his companion’s grim face, reached forth his hand, saying:

“Fare thee well, Nym; thou that art faithful to memory of my noble father. Mayhap we shall meet again and then . . . perchance, nay, — thou to thy charcoal and I . . . to work more black, or — God alone witteth. Howbeit, may the saints have thee in keeping and the sweet maid Brynda.” And then, or ever Nym could make reply, he rode suddenly away.

CHAPTER IX

TELLETH HOW JOHN HEARKENED TO THE STARS AND WHEREFORE

DEEP-PLUNGED in pensive melancholy went John but, schooled by life of constant danger and sudden perils, he watched his going with eyes quick and alert that quested ceaselessly to left and right, the while his busy brain pondered what was and what was yet to be. So rode he with lax rein and Apello, being a horse of no looks but much horse sense, ambled at his leisured ease. Thus the full-orbed moon had begun to peep at them when John espied one who lay outstretched on grassy bank beside the way, upstaring at the sky where, against purpling dusk, stars were winking; a long, lank man this, hairy, ill-dight and something foul of person, very hermit-like.

“Reverend Sire,” saith John, drawing rein, “by thy ill showing and sorry seeming, I guess thee to be a right holy man, and eke a very devil-chaser to exorcise spirits fiendly and dæmons fell — ha?” The hermit never so much as stirred; therefore John tried him again:

“Thou art, I judge, doubtless as potent ’gainst all black magic, witchcraft and spells soever?”

The recluse merely glanced at him and turned away; therefore John urged his Apollo a little nearer.

“Now, Reverend Holiness, an this be so, I would humbly crave thy saintly company, for — ”

“Psst! Psst!” exclaimed the hermit, with gesture of arrogant disdain. “Heark ye to the stars, fool!”

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Now at this, John surveyed him very earnestly, then, mutely obedient, lifted his gaze serenely heavenward, and having listened most attentively, hand to ear, he nodded, saying gravely:

“In troth, I never heard stars more eloquent.”

The hermit started and sat up to stare.

“How? How say ye?” he demanded.

“Not I,” answered John, gaze still raised skyward, “the stars, right Reverend, the stars! ‘Calmaron,’ says they, ‘par Hangstone Waste shall High Morven attain Pelynt . . . mayhap! A rich booty! Oh, rare!’ ”

The hermit arose and edged closer, peering, for John’s hood was close drawn.

“Say the stars aught other?” the hermit questioned in altered tone.

“Ay, faith!” nodded John. “They tell me now of one that neath the poor piety of holy hermit, neath the sorry seeming of torn habit and spattered cloak, goeth like lusty man-at-arms, one that prayeth by day somewhat and watcheth by night . . . and waiteth — for what? Aha, Pelynt sleepeth in a false security whiles destruction creepeth on her from the west, — ha, comrade? As for her Lady, this proud and valiant Duchess now, — eh, comrade, eh?”

“Ah!” groaned the hermit in sudden, strange fashion, lifting long arms to the starry heaven, his hairy fingers crooked like rending claws. “The Duchess! This proud Ippolita . . . to break her . . . trample her! Oh, Ippolita, one day shalt know all that woman’s flesh may endure, and plead to die — ”

“Nay, nay,” laughed John, a little grimly, “most Reverend Holiness, thou art, methinketh, harsh wi’ the lady, and she so young and tender. And yet these be but idle threats and such is wind — ”

"Peace!" cried the hermit with imperious gesture better suited to lordly mail. "Though I know ye not, know thou that I am him ye look for, so give me that ye wot of and begone."

"Lord," said John humbly, "an I seek one indeed to give him aught, how shall I ken ye for that same one?"

"Do I not point ye to the stars?" cried the hermit. "See — yonder!"

"Ay, I see them," answered John, "yet now they are dumb and do but wink."

"Fool, I point ye to the Bear."

"Aha!" murmured John. "So! Ursa Major, the Great Bear, the which twinkleth very bright. And lo, hear him growl! 'I've claws,' saith he, 'to rend and tear!' Now they do say that in Hangstone Waste men ha' died by rip o' claw —"

"Ha' done!" cried the hermit impatiently. "For, by Ursus the Bear, an ye bring letter, scroll or parchment, I charge ye deliver it now unto me."

"Ay, verily," answered John, clapping his hand to the pouch at his girdle, "'tis parchment I bring. Yet first, Messire Holiness, of this grimly beast; prowls it in Hangstone Waste this night?" Deigning no answer, the hermit reached forth sinewy hand; so John drew the parchment from his scrip and unrolling it, seemed to peer thereat in the waxing moonlight.

"'Tis map, sire," quoth he, "a plan of Pentavalon's inner defences, or so 'twould seem and right clerkly done. . . . Now here fairly writ is a D with a cross, — this should stand for the Duchess Ippolita, — ha?"

"Ay, who else! Come, bestow!"

"A moment, fair Reverence, — for lo, here beneath the Duchess show two crosses and under the one is writ: 'Dead, two thousand,' and under the other:

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‘Alive, twenty thousand.’ Now this shall also mean the Duchess, methinks?”

“Ay, fool, who else!” repeated the hermit impatiently. “Come, give it, I say.”

“Now, out — alas!” cried John. “For — ah, gentle sir, I, this very day, might have slain or taken alive this same lady and so been rich — ”

“Ha? And wherefore did ye not?”

“Holy Sire, for that I knew it not until came one Tomalyn hight and spake her name. Ah, woe’s me!”

“Tomalyn? Is he not her Chief Verderer?”

“The same.”

“So?” nodded the Hermit. “Then ’tis he dieth to-night.”

“Dieth? Ay, but how — how?”

“In Hangstone Waste — ”

“Good my lord, how know ye this?”

“Fool, how should I not? Now give me the missive and begone to say thy mission is accompt.”

Back into pouch went the parchment and in that moment the hermit was upon him with flash of sudden steel; but John, ever wary, swayed back in the saddle and, as the murderous dagger missed, swayed forward with hard-swung fist that, buffetting his assailant beneath the ear, staggered, checked and felled him headlong. Then the great horse Apollo, rearing beneath goading spur, leapt away at furious gallop.

CHAPTER X

TELLETH SOMEWHAT OF HANGSTONE WASTE, ITS TERRORS

ALONG wide road aglimmer in the dusk spurred John, through rustling gloom of woods, past the reedy marge of a dark and silent mere, whose placid waters bosomed a splendour of stars; on, with long tireless stride sped this powerful steed Apollo until they reached a place where the highway made a bend upon his left, sweeping up and away to Pentavalon City, whose embattled might towered vague and dark against the faint yet ever waxing radiance of the rising moon.

Here John halted to look about him with eyes of dreadful expectancy, for it was not towards the fair city he gazed but at a winding, steep track that led from the road down and down through a narrow defile to lose itself amid dark thickets and jagged rocks and strange, stunted trees.

And up from this dread pit of darkness came faint, stealthy rustlings, — an owl hooted dismally afar, a wolf howled from remote leafy glooms, and John, peering down into this place of dreadful death, breathed faintly through his nose, listening . . . listening . . . while his sinewy hand griped damp upon ready dagger hilt.

Up, up rose the pallid moon, filling the world with her ghostly light, pale beams that wrought a ghastly magic whereby familiar things became strange and dreadful . . . every shadow was a black and lurking menace.

John looked up at the stars now paling their glory to the moon's growing splendour, then shivering, he glanced round about him, — an eager, desperate look; then he crossed himself and turned to ride down into the dreadful and ominous blackness of Hangstone Waste, but checking suddenly, wheeled, and out flashed his dagger as from the dense gloom of trees beside that narrow way came the snort of a horse.

"Who goeth?" he demanded fiercely, peering at a dim-seen form. "Speak or take steel!" and he poised his dagger to throw. Then forth into the moonlight rode a slim, youthful-seeming shape, dight in glistening chain mail from armed head to spurred heel and whose surcoat bore the leopards of Pelynt.

"Sir," questioned John in short, Saxon English, "are ye truly for Pelynt and the Duchess, as yon blazon speaks ye?"

"That am I!" answered the knight in voice that rumbled harshly in his great closed helm.

"So?" nodded John. "Then, an ye be true man, let see the face o' thee." The knight reined back a pace and laying hand on the pommel of his sword, demanded haughtily and in voice booming louder than before:

"What do ye here?"

"Lo, noble Sire, I twiddle my thumbs, stare on the moon and — now mark me — I question the stars, hearkening to them with both mine ears. And how then, Lording?"

"Folly!" quoth the knight.

"Nay, but," saith John, leaning nearer, "are the stars dumb to thee? Yonder now above us sheweth the constellation of Ursa Major, the Great Bear, — well, hath he no message for thee? No single word?"

"Stint thy babblement and begone," quoth the

knight; "nay, first — tell me wherefore ye ride hither to Hangstone Waste at such ghostly hour?"

"Sir Gruffness," answered John, his keen eyes surveying this hoarse-voiced knight with ever-growing intentness, "I ride to Hangstone for that 'tis dæmon-rid, I hear, the haunt o' monstrous beasts, ogres and damned fiends —"

"Ha!" cried the knight very scornfully. "And think ye to charm such with thy poor singing and foolish strum of little harp?"

"Harp?" repeated John. "Prithee, how shouldst know I bear ever a harp?"

"'Tis . . . 'tis there," answered the knight in muffled tones, "there at thy saddlebow in leathern bag plain to see."

"Hast marvellous good eyen!" quoth John and sat thereafter fingering his dagger and gazing on the knight very earnestly. "An eye sharp as eagle," he nodded. "And thy voice, gentle Messire, thy voice so beyond nature gruff. By my life, now fain am I for sight o' thy face."

"Ay, and wherefore?"

"Sir, could I but know thee for honest man, a true knight faithful to the Duchess and Pelynt, I now might tell thee somewhat."

"Then speak," said the knight, riding near, "for I am of the Duchess her most privy council and faithful to her, heart and soul."

"Yet how shall I know this beyond all doubting?"

"Fool, fool, I am one she loveth right dearly, I!"

"Nay, but," sighed John, shaking head, "how shalt persuade me o' this?" The knight made a petulant gesture, then grasping sword by the blade, lifted its gleaming cross hilt against the moon, saying:

"Here, then, on holy rood I swear it!"

"And thy voice," quoth John, "thy voice is none so gruff as methought. Howbeit, ope thine ears, Sir Knight, and mark me well! The night is foul with treason, whiles Pelynt and its Duchess — oh, besottedness — snore and slumber in false —"

"Snore?" cried the knight, lifting sword with passionate, threatening gesture. "Dare ye speak me thus of the Duchess?"

"Even so!" nodded John, sheathing his dagger. "Moreover, scarce a mile hence I spake a hermit, a lean eremite that no hermit is but rather, I judge, spy to Fulk Fitz-Urse and knight of High Morven. And, afore him, divers others met I that furtive crept the forest ways. And thus, Messire, an the Duchess careth for thee, care thou for her and, careless o' thyself, speak her soundly, thus: That, 'spite her prideful, red-haired valiance, she is but merest woman, an ewe lamb beset by ravening wolves —"

"Ha, say ye so, forsooth —"

"Ay, do I!" nodded John vehemently. "And 'tis so I'd have thee unto the Duchess forthright declare. Fitz-Urse is astir, the Bear is up and awake! Pelynt the mighty, secure in her strength, shall find this very strength her weakness, and crash in blood and flaming ruin — except —"

"Hold — hold!" cried the knight in bitter scorn. "Sing it, I pray, sing and strum it to thy harp."

"God forbid, sir! And yet, belike I may somewhen, except the Duchess, minding her womanhood, choose her a man —"

"A man — ho, a man forsooth!" quoth the knight, urging his goodly steed so near that Apollo, tossing bony head, snorted for combat and bared vicious teeth.

"Fool!" cried the knight, reining his startled animal aside, "Fool, there be thousands of valiant men within our Duchy!"

"So I do hear," sighed John. "Your Duchy's need is — a man! One man! The man! A bold fellow, a man o' wiles, very subtle and crafty, of cunning stratagems and — "

"God's love!" exclaimed the knight mockingly. "And where shall our Duchess find such peerless champion and godlike paladin?"

"Bid her enquire for one yclept John — "

"Ha — thyself!" cried the knight, booming scornful laughter.

"Sir," answered John, gravely shaking his head, "I told thee not they named me so. But, since I am known, and thou of the Duchess such true lover, I charge ye say unto her that, except she be done with easeful sloth and awake right soon, Pelynt shall flame to heaven and know the dire bane of sack and ravishment, whiles she, alack her fair womanhood, — shall be the shameful sport of — "

"Oh, shame! Foul spy!" cried the knight, brandishing his sword.

"Not so," sighed John, "a warning voice I, — a head to scheme, a tongue to counsel, an arm to smite — "

Out flashed his sword and he wheeled Apollo with dexterous hand and knee as, uttering shrill, passionate outcry, the knight spurred against him in sudden, furious onset, bright blade whirling; but, warding the blow, John caught that upraised arm, wrenched it, twisted . . . and the young knight's sword fell clattering. Then was cry of pain, a thudding of wild hoofs, and John was alone, staring after that slim,

mail-clad figure that rocked so perilously in the high-peaked saddle.

“Love of God!” he exclaimed and made to follow, then checked and crouched, breath in check for very horror, as up from the perilous darkness of Hangstone Waste rose a wild, harsh whinny of laughter, shattering the solemn brooding hush and filling the night with terror, such laugh as John had never heard, — a bestial, chuckling roar, that came and was gone, leaving him to cower and shiver in a great and fearful amazement. But presently after, lifting eyes and sword to the moon-bright heaven, he spake between quivering lips.

“Almighty — Master of Life!” he murmured, “and thou, blessed saint and sweet angel that mothered me, comfort and go with me — now!” Then, wheeling Apollo, he rode down into the deadly blackness of Hangstone Waste.

Down and ever down, one sweating hand firm upon bridle rein, the other gripping hard on quivering sword hilt, his eyes questing this way and that, his every sense fiercely alert. So came he to a level sward shut in to the right by grim rocks that grew ever higher and more rugged, and to the left by gnarled trees, beyond which he caught the sullen gleam of water.

Now riding among these trees he beheld a stilly lake or tarn, choked here and there by rank weed and scum, its gloomy waters stretching away until swallowed in a vague mist; but above these dark waters rose a great crag whose beetling summit overhung the mere in strange, perilous fashion; and beholding this, John guessed it for the Hanging Stone itself.

Rigid and still as death sat he, staring round about

him, the desolate mere, the scowling rocks and misshapen trees, the great crag its jagged summit bright with the moon, its base lost in black shadow. And then his wise horse Apollo started, threw up unlovely head, cocked his sharp ears and uttered a whistling snort. Now looking whither his horse looked, John started likewise and caught his breath. Then swiftly, silently, he was afoot, had tethered Apollo and crouched to stare. . . . Crossing himself, he advanced his sword and began to creep toward the Hanging Stone, keeping in the denser gloom, — for at the base of this towering crag and darker than the dark, something stirred. . . . A stick snapped sharply beneath stealthy foot and instantly John was motionless.

“Jesu . . . help!” cried a strangling voice. . . . In fugitive moonbeam was glint of mail, flicker of whirling axe and then all was lost in the denser gloom. But from that blackness beneath the crag rose sounds of dire and desperate conflict . . . blows and gasping prayers, a shout thinned with terror, then all suddenly lost in a dreadful snarling that rose to a strange, joyous, chuckling roar and changed as suddenly to a dreadful, worrying sound. Thither leapt sweating John with ready sword and espied two dim shapes that writhed and twisted . . . had a vision of eyes and hair and gleaming fangs, as he drave in desperate thrust . . . felt the point go home . . . felt the sword wrenched from his grasp. . . . Then he was smitten to earth and staring up half-dazed, thought to see a monstrous claw twixt him and heaven and, rolling aside, smote upwards with his dagger . . . and was whirled backward and gasping, heard a brutish roaring, broken by whistling gasps and sobs and therewith speech scarce human:

“Out — out! Bloody be I! Sore smit — sore smit! Wala — wa! Hey och — ha!”

John was afoot, panting, desperate, yet poised alert, dagger in hand, to smite again. He heard a scutter of feet in heavy flight, a dolorous groaning and thereafter a gasping voice:

“God ha’ mercy! The Beast — oh, blessed Saint Cuthbert — the Beast speaketh! The Thing hath human tongue! Ha, good Saint Cuthbert, sweet Saint Cuthbert, help me now . . . lest I be blasted — ”

Stumbling thitherward, John beheld a vague, armed shape crouched upon its knees and grasped at it with shaking hand.

“Up!” he panted. “Up and away . . . for thy life, friend!”

Feebly the man arose and tottered whither John led till they came where the horse Apollo cropped at the grass with snorting gusto.

So together they ascended from that place of dread with many a fearful glance behind, up and out into the roadway, white with the pale serenity of the full-orbed moon.

CHAPTER XI

TELLETH HOW JOHN CAME TO PENTAVALON

AND now John saw his companion for a tall fellow whose great headpiece, smitten awry, showed the dint of a terrible blow.

Groaning, the man sank weakly on grassy bank beside the way and, loosing off his battered helm, disclosed a square, pallid sweat-streaked visage topped by greying hair.

"What — Tomalyn, and is't thou?" said John.

"That same!" groaned the Chief Verderer. "And yet woe's me — not the same! For the manhood is clean out o' me, my bowels be turned to water, comrade — I quake!"

"Forsooth and I too!" said John.

"My liver," groaned Tomalyn, staring aghast at his dented headpiece, "my liver is turned white as any snowdrop — see, see where yon fiendly Thing — smote! Holy Saint Benedict, I be timorous as any maid!"

"Yet art alive, man."

"Ay, that am I — thanks to thee!" quoth Tomalyn and, rising suddenly, he reached forth mailed arms to John in eager gratitude; then halted to stare. "Why thou — thou'rt the gleeman!"

"Verily!" nodded John. "Poor singer o' songs I, a strummer of lute. Our lady Ippolita named me Jingling John, you'll mind."

"Ay but, by Saint Cuthbert, thou'rt man enow to

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step twixt me and death! Ay, yon ghoulisn beast had me down, its claws lifted to rend and tear me, and thou — thou — ha, John Gleeman, so is Tomalyn o' Langley Broom thy loving friend henceforth while life endureth. Thy friends shall be mine, ay, and thy foes likewise, and my friends thine and — now by the Sacred Nails — see thy cape, John, thy cape!" Now looking down on himself, John saw in his leathern tippet and jerkin slits that gaped to his girdle.

"Devil's claws!" gasped Tomalyn. "The fiend had thee . . . and for my sake . . . yon devilish Thing grappled thee likewise then."

"Ay!" nodded John. "But for my mail jack, I were lying down yonder — a thing to shiver at!" And speaking, he closed his eyes and crossed himself very devoutly.

"Art bleeding, John."

"A scratch, Tomalyn."

"Well, I bleed too! Come therefore, let us mingle our blood in token we are comrades and blood brethren henceforth — so! And now I kiss thee — so! And now let us sit and talk a while for, per De, though thou'rt but chaunting minnesinger, the which giveth me to wonder, I ha' proved thee a very man this night."

"Faith now," laughed John, "now am I greatly minded to twang harp for thee."

"Why an thou wilt, brother, though I had liefer talk."

"So be it," nodded John, sitting down and crossing his long, lean legs; "say on, my Tomalyn."

"First then, brother, how should us that be but poor mortality cope with yon grimly Thing that is thing demoniac, a very fiend o' the pit — how?"

"With edge and point, Tomalyn, e'en as we did this night. For I do think this monster no fiend, but in nature as thou and I, monstrous though he be."

"Nay, comrade, could I but be assured o' this, then 'stead o' quaking like shiversome asp, I should grow bold forthright."

"Why, then," answered John, "though I lost my sword, alack, my dagger served me better — lo, here, — behold!" And he showed the weapon, its bright steel horribly dimmed here and there.

"Hey — blood?" cried Tomalyn joyously, testing it with hairy finger.

"Even so!" answered John, cleaning the blade in the goodly earth. "Now, should a man prick fiend, methinks 'twould spout fire and brimstone at the very least, whiles yon bestial Thing bleedeth honest blood, — thus I argue him no more than thing o' flesh even as ourselves."

"And herein, brother, is such vasty comfort, I ha' found me my manhood."

"Whiles as for me," sighed John, "I've lost me my good sword!"

"Shalt have a better, stout brother."

"Why verily, I might have won me such, a while since, of a young knight very passionate and with voice, Tomalyn, beyond nature gruff —"

"How — a knight?" quoth Tomalyn, starting afoot to glance hastily about. "Mean ye a noble youngling completely armed and mounted on sable beast?"

"Verily," nodded John, lips upcurving in sly smile, "a right fierce, harsh-spoken man-at-arms that named and smote me for spy —"

"Ha, John — oh, John, God send ye harmed him not!"

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“No littlest thing to harm. But of the Duchess now, — tell me why, with so many buxom lordly wooers, she weddeth none?”

“Ah, John, would God she might! In especial the young Earl Gui of Brandonmere, a potent lord and gent; or the Lord Julian of Weare, though I like him not. Yet alas, she’ll none o’ them — nor any man, I wot.”

“Yet methinks, Tomalyn, she is framed for love, apt for wife and motherhood; her very shape proclaimeth it.”

“Ay, mayhap, John, yet wit ye well, though she is right valiant in battle and I ha’ seen her in fight, though merciless as her sire when justice needs — she watched De Broham kick and die — ay, though she feareth nought alive under heaven, I do verily believe me she dreadeth wedlock.”

“Dreadeth?” repeated John. “With such richness of nature and warm loveliness o’ body? Go to, Old Ironsides, go to! Of such sort was Helen, Troy’s glory and doom, ay, and the wondrous Phryne and sleek, soft Cleopatra. Ha, my Tomalyn, mayest be right skilled i’ the mystery of hawk and hound, brach and pricket, but of womanhood thou knowest e’en less than I.”

“Nay, John, these arms cradled her the day she was born. I watched her grow, — a motherless child that my master the Duke doated on. ’Twas he learned her the manage of horse and arms, to order a battle in just array, yet — and most of all, learned her to heartily despise all men and, by Saint Cuthbert, methinks she proveth apt pupil.”

“Then she knoweth nought, think ye, of love?”

“Ay, faith, John. When her counsellors were for her ’spousing the young Earl Gui last spring, I ha’ known

her suffer him to kiss her fingers, ay, and her cheek now and then — ”

“How, in thy sight, Tomalyn?”

“Cog’s nails! And wherefore not?” John threw back his head and laughed right merrily.

“Ah, poor lady!” quoth he. “So is it the sweet soul of her hath ne’er so much as heard the rustle of love’s pinions.”

“And troth, comrade,” sighed Tomalyn, “fain am I she should wed some man and presently, for there is a stirring here and there, a growing unrest bred and fostered I know not how or where, a whisper that goeth that Duchy so potent as Pelynt should be ruled by a man.”

Here once again Tomalyn rose to peer all about with an anxious expectancy. “Brother John,” he questioned, “art sure ye nowise harmed the young knight ye wot of?”

“That did he!” cried a clear, ringing voice, and from the leafy umbrage sprang that same slim, mailed figure; beholding which, John sank down upon his knee, for now, framed in shining steel, the Duchess Ippolita’s sullen, beautiful face was looking down on him.

“Tomalyn,” said she, with imperious gesture of mailed hand, “arrest me this errant rogue.”

“Noble lady,” cried Tomalyn, humbly kneeling, “here is no rogue; by your grace here standeth right valiant friend that saved me lately from yon grimly Thing and — ”

“I know, I know!” cried she, with pettish stamp of mailed foot. “God’s light — I’ve ears, man, and heard what passed.”

“Right gracious mistress, to save me he dared most vile death, — see, see where yon loathly Beast rent and tore him, his jerkin, his — ”

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"This also I know, fool Tomalyn; heaven's mercy, I've eyes, man! So bring him my prisoner to Pentavalon; he shall lie dungeoned this night."

"Alas, sweet lady . . . an I needs must," groaned honest Tomalyn, "yet this night he saved me my life —"

"And bruised me mine arm!" she retorted, looking down on silent John beneath knit brows.

"And yet," he murmured, "lady, I bruised thee gently as I might."

"'Tis very rogue, Tomalyn, that with tongue right eloquent hath doomed me and our Duchy to black shame and destruction."

"And yet," sighed John, "I spake but warning, a word to the wise where meseemeth no wisdom is — a voice, alack, that crieth i' the wilderness —"

"This so base fellow, Tomalyn, scorning me that I am not man, would snatch from me all sovereign power for that I am mere woman! And lastly, Tomalyn, — oh, lastly, he . . . he saith that slumbering, I snore and for this . . . he should be hanged and shall to-night himself snore in dungeon! So get to horse and speedily, — mount, I say, and bring him!"

So presently they rode toward mighty Pentavalon, John and Tomalyn side by side, with the Duchess Ippolita pacing slowly before; and now she went unhelmed, the tender radiance of the sinking moon bright in the close-wreathed braids of her hair. And ever John viewed this shining head with troubled eyes.

"Brother," whispered Tomalyn, leaning to his ear, "and did ye forsooth show violence to our noble lady yonder?"

"Somewhat," answered John gloomily.

"Alack!" sighed Tomalyn. "This sore forethinketh me, for this was treason and treason is death."

"Amen!" quoth John. "So should death be busy anon for Treachery stalketh rampant, methinks."

"Howbeit, thou'rt my blood brother, John, and so will I do my best for thee. And by good hap Simon Shaw of the Guards' archers hath the postern this night and he is mine ancient comrade."

On they rode up and beneath massive, towered wall that soared above them, its embattlements fretting the sky; so came they at last where, set deep in scowling arch, was the narrow postern gate that opening to the Duchess Ippolita's clear summons, showed men whose bright mail blinked in the red flare of torches, grim-faced men and all of middle age, John noticed, veterans all.

"Simon a Shaw," said the Duchess, with backward gesture towards John, "here's prisoner to your ward. I set him in charge of thee and Tomalyn. Let him lie this night aloft in Wrykyn — thou knowest where, Tomalyn." Then off she rode, her horse's hoofs ringing loud in the echoing ways of the sleeping city. And John, sitting his horse Apollo, watched her go very wistfully and being thus thoughtful, heeded not the clash of arms and buzz of talk about him until came Tomalyn with his comrade Simon Shaw, a squat, grizzled man who, leaning on long bowstave, stared up at John, thick brows a-pucker beneath the rim of his shining head-piece.

"Friend," quoth he, hand outstretched, "sith this night hast won my comrade Tomalyn from claws o' death to thy friendship, so art my friend also." Answered John, clasping hands:

"Good master Simon, such friendship warms the very heart o' me and I am the better therefore, no matter what betide."

"Ay, there it is!" said Simon gloomily. "For wit ye well our lady Ippolita is of passionate spirit, valiant

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and like her sire, the great Duke, something hasty and — betimes — over-fierce. Yet being woman and young, she can be compassionate. . . . Well, thou'rt to lie i' the Wrykyn Tower and 'tis none so ill; it hath bed and a chair! Now had it been the dungeons — ”

“Then, by Saint Cuthbert,” cried Tomalyn, “I should ha' slept dungeoned with him, — ay, faith would I, Sim! Tonight shalt be well enow, John, and tomorrow mayhap our noble lady shall smile on thee. So light down and us shall bring ye to the Wrykyn Tower.”

They led him along winding streets and across a wide market square where rose the mighty citadel; over a drawbridge, beneath a wide, embattled gateway where arms clattered and voices challenged, and so up a narrow, winding stair until Simon, hard-breathing, paused to unlock and throw open an iron-studded door, and raising the lanthorn he bore, showed a grim chamber, though airy and with bed and chair, a cumbrous piece of furniture.

“Good faith,” said John, glancing about. “I have lodged me worse and for good money ere now.”

“Why then,” quoth Tomalyn, “here is my cloak to thy more comfort, John.”

“And mine,” said Simon. “Fain would I leave ye this lanthorn but it may not be, — and so, friend John, a fair night t' ye.”

So they left him; key turned, bolts rattled, their mailed feet jingled away down the stair. Thus in the dark John felt his way to the bed, did off his spurred boots of untanned leather, loosed his girdle and bedded upon the two cloaks, stared awhile upon the darkness very wistfully; then said a prayer, composed himself to sleep and slumber gently took him.

And thus came John of the Green into this famous city of mighty-walled, many-towered Pentavalon.

CHAPTER XII

RECOUNTETH HOW JOHN IN CELL AT MIDNIGHT TOOK OATH OF SERVICE

HE was standing beneath King Tristan's great gallows in Fovant, the choking noose harsh about his throat, and he was staring down into the dark, pensive face of King Tristan, who looked back at him faint-smiling, to watch him die. But even as he gazed, this so placid, merciless face changed and became wondrously transfigured, for lo — instead of the King's pale, sinister visage, he was looking into the glowing beauty of the Duchess Ippolita's face, all perfected by a new tenderness, a womanly gentleness and a something still more wonderful. And even as they gazed upon each other in a yearning rapture, her ruddy lips quivered to murmurous speech:

“Die for me, John, and I will die with thee, — so together shall we win to greater living and all the love-sweet joys of life.”

Then the deadly rope bit deep and gasping with the agony of it, he awoke and coming to an elbow, blinked in the light of a lanthorn that showed him the Duchess Ippolita seated in the great chair, watching him, chin in hand. She had changed her knightly mail for clinging silken robe, and her shining hair, loose braided for sleep, hung down upon her moving bosom in two ruddy gleams.

For a moment he stared, mused with sleep, almost believing her but vision of dream; but sensing all the sullen, disdainful arrogance of her, lightly he arose

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and touching knee to pavement, made her his very humble reverence, saying:

“Noble Duchess, did I snore?”

“Nay,” she answered, “gasped and moaned like poor affrighted maid, thou boldest of men, whereby I judge thy dreams were evil.”

“Yea, lady, forsooth, and yet nay, — for I dreamed of a woman that was Ippolita, yet seemed the maid Lia but showed nobler than either o’ these truly be.”

“I think you shall die tomorrow, Jingling John!”

“Why then, thou blind Perfection of Gracious Gentleness, for sake o’ thy poor innocents of Pelynt, I must needs speak, whiles I may, to ope the stone-blind eyes of thine intelligence, an this be possible, — to see those perils shall destroy thee else.”

“’Gainst what and whom would ye warn me?”

“Fulk Fitz-Urse.”

“Fool, he is no more than drunken dullard, a slothful sot!”

“Art sure o’ this?”

“All the world doth know it; ’tis common report.”

“And common report is commonly a liar, — the cloak o’ deception hiding active villainy.”

“So thus would ye make a profit of my fears! So shall that scheming head be stricken off for cunning head of roguish spy.”

“So be it,” he answered, averting his eyes to escape her placid, searching gaze, “an ye so prove me, so let it be. Yet an it so be, — then alas for thy peerless body, thy poor people and this Duchy of Pelynt for, John dead, what power shall avail thee? None, I trow.”

“Oh!” she cried in bitter scorn. “Sure never was heard such shameful boaster!”

“Lady, I, John, knowing John all his days, child and

man, angel and devil, do thus rate John so greatly that well weet I 'twere better for John that John die, since John dead shall be nobler than John alive. For — and mark this, Lady! — though John save thee and thine from all lesser perils, how may John save thee from John, his most perilous self? Here, noble Ippolita, is riddle death alone shall resolve.”

“Or . . . 'stead of death,” said she musingly, while her eyes mocked him, “thou’rt creature of such nimble tongue, I might crown that guileful head with cap of Folly and chain ye to sorry jackanapes to make sport for an idle hour. Since Wiglaf fled, I lack for gestour. How say ye to this?”

“That then, sweet gentle lady, I should be merryman perforce, a fool of fools to make folly for lesser fools, — as thus!” And, striking antic posture, he broke forth into a murmurous chant, intoning these words:

“So then like very fool I’d jingle,
Yet wisdom would with folly mingle
As thus, sweet Lady, — now perpend
Those dainty ears to Folly lend:
So hearken thou
And hear me now!
Upon a time, in dead o’ night
Was stabbed a friar, Gregorious hight.”

The Duchess started and leaned nearer.

“‘Stabbed at the altar!’ quo’ the Friar.
The which doth prove him very liar.
For in a garden smit was he,
By faithful hand that warded thee —”

“How? Whence had ye this?” she demanded.

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“Nay, Lady, nay —
Ha’ patience pray!
Upon a night whiles thou wert sleeping
About thy bed sly flame stole creeping.
Enkindled ’twas by chance, one saith;
Yet, since this Chance aimed at thy death,
I fain would know this Chance his name — ”

“Oh, have done with these jingling rhymes!” said she impatiently. “Tell me what ye would have me fear? ’Gainst whom would ye wake my suspicions and why? Tell me plainly how ye know thus much.”

“Lady, by report uncommon and therefore the more credible. As for suspicion, now who or which of all thy loving subjects would give thy flamelike beauty to the fire? ’Tis painful death, I hear!”

The young Duchess rose and looked upon John with eyes widening to fearful doubts and troubled speculation.

“How?” she demanded. “Will ye dare tell me that Fitz-Urse, or any, may harm me here in my own city of Pentavalon? Are not my walls strong? Have I not ten thousand swords, ay and more, to smite at my command?”

“And yet, madam, did I not see thee beset by three men, almost within sight of these same stout walls? Did not fire verily drive thee from thy bed? My lady Ippolita, your seeming power is very weakness, for lapped thus in a false security, ye shall fall an easy prey to enemy vile and merciless, except ye beware.”

“Of whom, man, and what?” she cried angrily.

“Of treachery, madam, that, here in your mighty city, raiseth head against ye, even as we talk — ”

“Now prove me this, show me evidence beyond all doubting, or by God His blessed light — ”

"Swear not, gentle lady," said John, reaching his girdle whence it lay, "for here is that shall show me no liar," and from leather wallet he drew forth the parchment map and, unrolling it carefully, gave it into her hand, saying:

"See how, mighty Duchess, thou poor woman-creature, there be creatures alive this night do yearn very earnestly for that right shapely body o' thine, either as mere dead carcass (alas, the word!) or quick with life for — lo, here right clerkly set forth in fair black and white, mayst read the estimated worth o' thyself as, — Dead: two thousand! A paltry sum and thyself, though dead, such proud Duchess! Alive: twenty thousand! See how thy value is risen now! By this we may judge these, thy ill-wishers, do most passionately desire to snare thee warm and instinct with life. . . . Ay, but wherefore? Oh, most alluring Nobility — wherefore?"

At this she blanched and, looking from the parchment to John's grave face, sank down in the chair as if suddenly faint.

"Oh!" she whispered. "Oh, most vile! God and the saints forbend!"

"Amen!" murmured John, for now he saw her, for the moment, no more than trembling maid sick with fear and shame, insomuch that he ventured nearer, to point the map with directing finger. "Ah, lady, whoso wrought this, knoweth Pentavalon's inner defences passing well, — see, the towers, the chiefest named, even thine own lodgement boldly set forth. Then mark here beside the Lion Tower these figures one hundred and six! Wherefore tomorrow, an my head be still on these shoulders, 'tis my intent to make stealthy enquiry of the Lion Tower its every stone."

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Up leapt the Duchess, as eager for desperate action, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright and fierce; just so, thought John, the mighty Duke her father might have looked, that proud lord of so many victories who had lifted Pelynt to such power and fame.

"John," said she softly, yet with look very grimly resolute, "needs must I believe this, since here is evidence beyond all doubting. Now, on thy life, whence hadst this so damnable thing?" Forthwith he made relation of the matter — so much as he thought fit.

"A tall man completely armed?" she repeated, frowning. "Shouldst know him again?"

"Madam, he lacketh the top joint of his little finger. Know ye of any man so marked?"

"Nay," she answered, "but an I find such, he shall lack for head also." Sinking back in the great chair, she studied that dread parchment anew and presently looked at John with kindlier eyes, saying:

"I mind me didst make some mention of a hermit; tell me of him."

"Noble lady, I met with him by chance at place called Saint Wynan's Well or Cross and, him accosting, he scornful bade me hearken to the stars —"

"To hearken, quoth a? This were folly."

"Why, so thought I, lady, yet I hearkened and, beholding the constellation of Ursa Major very bright above us, drew bow at venture and suggested they spake me of the Bear — Fitz-Urse."

"Oh, now this was shrewd in thee! And what said the hermit?"

"Rose to the bait very fishlike, lady, declared himself of Fitz-Urse his following and demanded of me any message, — aught I had by word o' mouth or letter."

"And what didst thou, John?"

"Showed him yon same parchment."

"Oh, fool!"

"Yet in my folly was grain o' wisdom, lady, for, by thus showing, I won him to read and declare me the truth I had suspected, to wit — the threat to thee of death or worse. Moreover, he cried upon Ippolita exceeding bitter and vowed her woman's flesh should endure such evils she should plead for death. A something unkindly hermit as I dared pronounce him —"

"Oh, a dog!" she cried. "A caitiff to hang! A beast to be hunted! What like was he? Saw you his face?"

"Plainly. He showed neither old nor young, black o' hair and a scar upon his dexter cheek."

"So?" she exclaimed, clenching slim, fierce hands. "Now certes this was Piers of Deneholm, that I drave into shameful banishment . . . ah, would I had hanged him! Would he were no more than vile bones and senseless corruption —"

"Content thee, sweet lady, he shall so be anon — eke as thou and I and the rest on us —"

"Oh, beastly fellow, what mean you?"

"That death is our common lot, noble Ippolita. Meantime thy blackest menace, methinketh, is this, — that in thy Duchy — ay, here in thy so mighty Pentavalon, Treachery flaunteth i' the sun's very eye and plotteth woeful destruction on thee and thine — and all unsuspect."

"And — this the evidence!" said she, frowning at the crumpled parchment in her hand.

"Also, lady, our lordly hermit told me that this night in Hangstone Waste thy faithful Tomalyn was to die."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, in sudden whisper.

"Now, madam, how should this hermit know Tomalyn would keep watch in Hangstone Waste tonight? Who beside thyself witted o' this?"

"None! Oh, none, I vow to God!" she answered, sinking down into the chair as if suddenly weak. "He spake me most privily in the garden."

"And none o' your bower ladies thereby?"

"Not one. No, not e'en my loved Adelisa. I walked me pensive amid my flowers, all alone save for Tomalyn himself."

"Natheless, lady, ears must have heard," quoth John, pinching at shaven chin in a deep perplexity. "In the pleasaunce garden . . . ha! Stood ye, by hap, nigh the oratory that is there?"

"Nay, as I do mind me, 'twas by the fountain. . . . But how know you of the oratory, John?"

"The fountain!" he repeated thoughtfully. "Might one lie hid thereby?"

"Nay, 'twere impossible."

"And yet one did, lady, one did! Stealthy ears must have hearkened . . . And yet . . . here's the riddle — that Tomalyn, being no more than himself, should come so near death and you, this potent Duchess and very mark for Treachery to aim at, should be nowise scathed or troubled! Here's wonderful perplexity . . . except . . . ha — spake you Tomalyn how 'twas your intent to ride for Hangstone Waste in knightly guise, — said you aught o' this?"

"Nay, I had no thought of this until later —"

"And so is the riddle answered!" quoth John, clapping hand to thigh. "And so should we now give thanks to right merciful God! For . . . ah, Ippolita . . . had this thought come to thee and been spoken in thy

garden — I do think the power that willed Tomalyn's death would now have that fair body o' thine . . . happily dead or . . . most shamefully alive!"

Now here once again she looked up at him with that same quick, womanly terror in her eyes, and this time she reached him her hand.

"Oh — John — " she whispered. "I'm all adread!" And feeling these slim fingers how fast they clung, John instinctive sank to his knee and touched this hand to brow and heart and so held it fast, until she laughed a little uncertainly and spoke soft-voiced:

"What, John o' Jingles, dost pledge me the fealty oath as thou wert verily knight or potent lord!"

"Nay," he answered gravely, "I pledge thee no more than that I am a heart and brain to serve thee in thy present need."

"Messire John," she murmured, leaning nearer, "hast ever remarked that I have eyes and ears?"

"Indeed!" he answered.

"Well, these do tell me thou'rt no poor gleeman! That head is too proud, thy look too high and bold, this hand fitter to knightly ploys than plucking little harp. . . . Thus was it I something doubted thee, but now — "

"Ah, noble lady," quoth he, rising suddenly. "She is wise that doubteth all men — "

"Certes, John, except a man bear truth in his eyes. So am I glad of thee. And sithen hast pledged thy heart and brain to my service, let them serve me now. For though my friends and counsellors be many, there are but three I do trust with all my heart, and these — old lords, comrades in arms of the Duke my father. Oh, I am so lonely amid all this stir of knightly faith and lordly homage, God wot — that tonight I am seeking

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aid of thee that I nothing know, for that these woman's eyes do tell me thou'rt worthy."

Up rose John and began to pace back and forth, keeping his face averted and hating himself and King Tristan very fervently.

"My lady Ippolita," said he suddenly, "so long as these vile, creeping evils menace thee, for thee I'll live with my every breath."

"And what wilt demand of me, John; how must I requite such devotion?" Now at this he frowned on her so pridefully that she incontinent frowned back on him.

"Lady, think you I ply for hire?" he demanded.

"Yea, I do!" she retorted. "Even as you strum and sing for such small monies as may be flung ye."

"Highness," quoth he, bowing, "the service I do proffer thee is far below or infinitely above all recompense soever. This body, this life, this thing I am — who shall set a price thereto? Nor thou, nor I, nor any save only God."

"And God knoweth I'll none of such service!" she cried angrily. "He that would serve me must, as mere servant, serve with all seemly humility."

"Ay but, lady, there is a service that, in freely serving all that need, serveth God. Thus, I trow, there is no title more noble, no name more honourable than Servant. Thus whiles life be mine, servant will I be — for this mere service its own sake."

"Well, I am warned!" said she, frowning from him to the parchment in her white fist. "And I am nor fool nor craven and shall rid Pelynt of this small matter of treason by subtle craft or force of arms."

"Amen!" he murmured fervently. "So be it, I pray."

"Fool!" she exclaimed. "Doubt ye my power? Think ye Pelynt must fall, lacking thy poor aid? Shall thy wit

alone, thy single arm confound and smite back destruction? Art thou our only hope and deliverance — thou?"

"Lady, a goose — and his fellows — once saved Rome — "

"Yea, yea — but these were geese and thou no more than thy poor, meagre self."

"Verily," he answered, shapely mouth upcurving in slow smile, "but this same self is — John!"

"Ay, John forsooth!" she mocked. "John, that for all his vaunting cannot find rhyme to jingle with my name!"

"Ay but he can — at a pinch!" said John. "As thus:

'Twere labour vain and follyta
Speak wisdom to Ippolita — "

"Out!" she cried. "'Tis vile rhyme!"

"Indeed, so think I!" he nodded. "Yet it hath some reason — "

"'Tis hateful!" she cried. "'Tis presumption! And who'rt thou to preach wisdom?"

"One that hath been bitterly schooled by hardship and suffering, my lady, and thus a man must needs come by some little knowledge of himself and this poor world. . . . I have seen fair towns aflame . . . sack and pillage . . . innocence brutalized . . . the cries of shame and agony ring yet within mine ears!"

"Well, this . . . this was war!" said she faintly.

"This was butchery!" quoth John. "Fair women and little children. And there be children and women amany in Pelynt!"

"Well, by war will I protect them."

"Ippolita — ha, lady, how shall war serve thee 'gainst enemy unseen and nothing known? A foe that

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masked in familiar guise doth lout on humble knee to kiss that unwary hand, to smile into that face with vows of loyal faith and love, yet waiting . . . waiting for good chance to snare thee to death and nameless evil! And . . . oh, Ippolita, an they should so take thee! Thy valiant spirit broken—that lovely body . . . all the fair, proud beauty of thee fouled . . . nay, sweet Jesu forbend!” And forgetting all save the dread horror of what might be, John cast himself upon his knees and lifting clasped hands, cried in voice of agony:

“Angels holy, ye ministers of God, look down, look down,—and oh, thou sweet Spirit that mothered me, stoop from heaven and show thy poor, benighted son how evil may be outfaced and driven hence. Merciful God, make us strong and in all things able. Shelter Thou these innocents, in especial children and all women . . . And this Ippolita Thy child, save her from all harms soever . . . open her eyes that she may see and know . . . and for myself, show me a way and should I suddenly die, let it be clean death and to purpose of abiding good. . . .”

Thus prayed John, then bowing head on breast was silent a while nor moved, until hearing a sigh he started and glanced up and saw the proud young Duchess was kneeling also; now though her hands were reverently folded as if in prayer, her shining eyes looked upon John and when she spoke her voice was reverent as her posture.

“Surely never man prayed as thou!”

“Surely never man needed prayer more than I!” he answered bitterly.

Rising from her knees, she looked down on him in wonder, saying:

“Thou’rt man so various that I, knowing men some-

what, do grow all bemused of thee. Art thou indeed vaunting boaster, poor singer, proud lord or meek holy man?"

"All these am I by hap," he answered lightly; "yea, and so much beside that I grieve for my poor humanity. I would be a demigod to juggle with the stars, or Puck astride a moonbeam, weaving such freakish spells should fright Sathanas back to Acheron's pit —"

"Thou art a man, John, that loveth thy mother's memory with a sweet reverence."

"My mother!" he repeated, in voice changed as his look. "Would she might reach down from heaven and lift this woeful, weary soul o' me to God's abiding mercy and . . . rest."

"What then is thy trouble, John?" she questioned so kindly that he answered impulsively:

"Pledged am I to evil for good of myself and many others, yet, knowing this for evil, am like to lose myself in death to no purpose. . . . By dastard act to win these so many back to life and the joy of it?" He paused and the Duchess, seeing him thus, staring wide-eyed on vacancy, his sinewy hands clenched, questioned him again in voice slyly murmurous:

"How art pledged, friend John, and to whom?" He raised his head and meeting the keen scrutiny of her bright eyes, sighed and relaxed.

"Troth now," said he, wagging head in whimsical self-reproach, "the night creepeth apace and I waste breath on thy humble John."

"Nay," said she with imperious gesture, "an thou be truly my John, I charge thee speak of John all that he was, is and would be."

"Lady, this should outlast the night. Suffice it that poor John, having known so much of strife and evil,

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doth therefore love all beauteous things the more. He is one so hateth the cruel, insensate ravage of war and bloodshed that he would bathe him in blood and shed his own to make an end on't. . . . And the night stealeth away, so let us take counsel — ”

“So then,” said she, knitting her brows at him, “wilt not trust me with tale of thyself and secret purposes? How then shall I have faith in thee?”

“My eyes, lady; let these speak, for according to thy report they be honest.”

“Then show them, look on me — so! Now, from thy heart, — why wilt thou, a stranger asking no recompense, peril life in this my cause?”

“In good faith,” he answered, with his wistful smile, “’tis that my life is held but loosely twixt finger and thumb, as it were, and if it is soon to fly hence, as seemeth very like, I would lose it to some purpose, and what better than in thy service for the good of thy people.”

“Thou’rt cunning in thy evasions!” she said, frowning impatiently. “A secret creature that yet my woman’s nature bids me trust. So will I use thee. Come now, what is thy rede anent this peril of treachery? Battle I nothing fear, — but for this stealthy menace, how may I know these hidden foes, how discover them?”

John stood, chin in hand, his sombre brooding gaze upon the slim foot that beat the flagstones so impatiently beneath her broidered gown, until she fretful bade him speak, and started up and crossing to the narrow iron-barred window, stood dismayed to see it framed the dawn.

“Oh, the day — so soon!” cried she. “Now what of evil shall this new day bring, think you, John?”

"Myself!" he answered so bitterly, that she turned to view him in a quick wonderment.

"Thyself?" she questioned. "How so — ?"

"To thy judgment," he answered, "Guile must we outmatch by craft more cunning . . . to force these secret enemies into instant and open action . . . so let me be haled in bonds before your council."

"Nay, but how shall this serve?"

"Lady, I am the bait to the hook, the lure for them to stoop at, the lime o' the twig! Hear me now and, according to thy faith in John, act or no — as thus: Denounce me before thy assembled counsellors for spy sent to thy undoing by King Tristan of Gerance."

"From Tristan — thou?" she cried.

"Ply me with fierce question, lady; and to all mine answers show scornful disbelief."

"Tristan is my bitter foe," quoth she; "and thou —"

"I — am John, lady."

"Ay," cried she fiercely, "and sent by Tristan to my hurt. Is this very truth or foolish wile?"

"Abide the issue and know, lady."

"Nay, meseemeth I were wiser to hang thee forth-right."

"Faith, and so think I!" he nodded. "And yet, whiles I live, I'll live for Pelynt and her Duchess."

"Nay," she sighed, "thou'rt too subtle for this poor world and me. . . . I think I shall make thee thing for crows to peck."

"The birds shall rejoice therefore, lady, but how shall this advantage thyself or Pelynt?"

But speaking no other word, she caught up the lanthorn, crossed swiftly to the door and was gone, leaving him, a man very pensive, to gaze on the waxing radiance of dawn.

CHAPTER XIII

TELLETH HOW JOHN WAS BROUGHT TO JUDGMENT

THUS it befell that, waking to a touch, John started up to see grizzled Simon looking down on him, a gloomy man that wagged grim head.

“Alack, John friend,” quoth he, “I come to bring thee to trial for thy life. Our comrade Tomalyn pleadeth thy cause with our lady Duchess even now — yet I doubt, John, I doubt, for ’tis peevish lady — frowned on me very blackly, a did . . . and ordered thee in fetters — lo, here they be!” And he beckoned to one of his company from whom Simon, cursing fiercely, took the heavy shackles, as John held forth his wrists.

“Suffer me now, friend,” quoth he, “suffer me, with a wanion, since I needs must.”

Now presently, as they marched their jangling prisoner across the inner bailey, to them came Tomalyn, also very woeful.

“Brother,” quoth he, “she scowleth and no love for me, — ’tis her fierce hour . . . ay, like the Duke her father. . . . Howbeit, an she kill thee, John, then must she slay me too for . . . oh, man, I love thee right well.”

“And I thee!” answered John, reaching forth shackled hands. “And Tomalyn, ’tis in my thought we shall live to smite yet for the Duchy, thou and I and Simon here.”

They led him into the towering keep, through the blooming pleasaunce garden to a stately chamber of

audience where sat the Duchess throned with her lords of council. And halting with his guards about him, John with quick keen glance questioned their ten faces, arrogant with youth, stern with experience and grim with age; and sternest, grimmest, the one-eyed, battle-scarred visage of him that stood upon the Duchess Ippolita's right hand, and to whom she now spake, scarce troubling to glance towards John.

"My lord Seneschal, we have word that this prisoner is spy hither sent by our old-time, inveterate foe Tristan, King of Gerance. Hither is he brought to question and judgment. Hear ye him."

Scarcely had she spoken than rose a resplendent young councillor curled and begemmed, who addressed himself to the Duchess with many bows and much exaggeration of gesture.

"Most sweet and gracious lady, peerless dame of might and beauty, I pray you let this fellow hang forthright and so be done, for I and my noble Robert de Gysbourne —"

"Peace!" croaked the one-eyed Seneschal harshly. "Be silent, my Lord of Hartsmead. When knew ye our Duchess doom man unheard? Peace, I say!"

"Sir Seneschal," cried the angry Earl, tossing his lovelocks, "as one of her Grace's councillors, I brook not —"

"Be dumb, thou furred tuffet!" snarled the battle-scarred Seneschal. Young Arrogance stared angrily at Battered Experience, drew hissing breath for passionate retort, met the glare of that one fierce eye and, abasing his two, was dumb.

Now all eyes were bent upon these, only John looked at the young Duchess and saw her ruddy lips aquiver and long-lashed eyes glad with secret laughter,

yet when she spoke her look was stern and imperious as her tone:

“Verily, ’twould seem my Lord of Hartsmead is overly young for such grave assembly.”

At this up leapt a tall red man whose voice was loud and eye truculent; cried he:

“Great lady, an your councillors must be ancient greybeards and baldpates, then o’ your grace, what o’ me?”

“You, Sir Raynald Valence,” she murmured, viewing him ’neath drawn brows, “shall be seated like your betters, or by God’s good light ye shall sit in shackles. Down, I say!” Sir Raynald sat forthwith, but his rubicund visage showed redder, his eye more truculent than ever, or so thought John.

“And now,” said the Duchess, looking serenely round upon them, one and all, “the prisoner shall be heard. Speak thou!” and she beckoned to John who, stepping forward between grim Simon and watchful Tomalyn, spoke thus:

“Noble Duchess and ye lords chosen of Pelynt, true it is that I am from Tristan come and in his Royal name do warn ye how that Fulk Fitz-Urse is even now plotting destruction in Pelynt — ”

Now here was sudden clamour of voices, some that jibed and mocked him, some that threatened or laughed in fierce derision.

“Lies! Lies to cozen us! Fitz-Urse shall never dare us!”

“ ’Tis a wile of crafty Tristan to blind us!”

“Ay — ay, since when was Limping Tristan friend to Pelynt? Look now, an we, believing this accursed spy, march out against Fitz-Urse in High Morven, then shall Tristan leap from Gerance with all his

powers to smite us or we be aware! So death on this spy! — Let him hang!”

“First let him speak!” commanded the grim old Seneschal, his one eye ever watching John’s untroubled face and who now, the clamour subsiding, continued in the same serene and gentle voice:

“Lordings, I tell ye the Bear that seemeth asleep is broad awake; Fulk Fitz-Urse is up and moveth privily to your destruction. He hath made of the Hangstone Waste a terror, to some purpose! His secret envoys walk among ye, unchallenged and unknown; their watchword is ‘the Bear’ and their sign the constellation of Ursa Major; these do, like some dread yet slow disease, pervade your body politic — ”

“Nay, tush!” cried the young Earl of Hartsmead. “Here is but whirl of windy words and do make no sense — ”

“Then shake those ears, boy!” snorted Sir Richard the Seneschal. “Shake yet perpend! Say on, thou lean knave!” and obedient to his curt nod, John proceeded:

“Take heed, sirs, for spite your stout walls, these stealthy envoys pervade the Duchy and, showing like friends familiar, do stir up the people to growing seditious discontent; they be here in mighty Pentavalon, yea, perchance divers of these traitors, sworne to Fitz-Urse and the ruin of Pelynt, do even now sit among ye in this chamber.”

A dagger, sped by sudden hand, smote and rebounded from John’s hidden shirt of mail and as he gasped reeling from the missile, was sudden fierce uproar; fingers pointed, fists were clenched against him, flashing steel menaced him, in especial the jewelled dagger of Hartsmead’s young earl and the eager sword of red-haired

De Valence. But ere these could strike, before him were the stalwart forms of Tomalyn and Simon Shaw, while the Duchess, throned in her high chair, watched all, chin in hand, with eyes quick and bright beneath down-sweep of slumberous-seeming lashes.

"Death to the spy — kill!" cried a voice harsh and passionate, and four lords of the council made at John, sword in hand; then leapt old Sir Richard the Seneschal and marvellous nimble (thinks John).

"Back!" he croaked, white hair bristling. "Stand, or by Holy Rood blood shall spill —"

"'Tis lying rogue!"

"'Tis spy of King Tristan! — And shall die!"

"Ha, death to him . . ."

"Nay, not here . . . not in the Duchess her presence."

"Then drag him forth . . . kill, kill —"

Now suddenly, piercing this harsh clamour, in voice high and clear as any bell, the Duchess cried, naming them each and every, till they were awed to sullen silence, watching where she stood upon the dais fronting them, a creature slender but deadly, her youthful joyance gone, her features set to such look of merciless ferocity that sullen murmurs were hushed to a dreadful stillness, a silence wherein for a moment no man so much as moved; then in ringing tones she spoke, her wide bright eyes questing every face:

"Hear me all and, my lords, wit ye well! This man John, be he spy or very friend, resteth in my care. Serf, villein, knight or lord of ye all, harm, let or stay this my prisoner, and that man will I hang from the Wryken forthright. And so, my lords of council, ye may go!" Silently they bowed to her and silently filed out from the chamber, nor did she speak or move until

the echo of their footsteps had died away; then pointing at John and beckoning to Simon and Tomalyn:

"Follow!" said she, and led the way through a small door behind the dais.

So they brought John into a chamber fragrant with new-culled flowers and very richly furnished; moreover, here were rugs and carpets of the Orient, such as John in all his travels had rarely seen.

And here, upon great divan couched upon pillows, lay the Duchess Ippolita, and ate an apple with snapping, vicious bites of sharp white teeth.

"Come sit ye," said she, beckoning them with petulant gesture. "Sit ye all three, and when I have finished mine apple, we will talk. Yet first, Simon, off with those fetters." And when they had done off John's shackles, they sat very silent and solemn all three, only John's sensitive mouth twitched and his grey eyes laughed (albeit askance) to behold the so vicious snapping of those white teeth. But though he had averted his head she knew he laughed at her and on the instant, impetuous as angry child, threw the apple core at him, whereat Tomalyn started and Simon shook foreboding head; but she, perceiving the missile rebound from John's wide breast, sat up with sudden question:

"The dagger that struck you, John a Green, — wert harmed?"

"No whit, Gracious Highness," he answered and stooping, he picked up the apple core and proffered it on bended knee.

"Art done with it?" he questioned. "Or —"

"Mayst keep it!" she answered, flushing to such anger that Tomalyn shuffled in a vast unease, while Simon stifled a groan; but opening his gypsire John placed the apple core very carefully therein. Now at

this, and to the staring amaze of Tomalyn and Simon, she laughed high and full-throated as any joyous girl.

"Oh, sad heart o' me!" she cried. "This hath done me good! Hast won mighty treasure there, thou Jingling John."

"Verily!" he answered gravely. "Who knoweth what wonders shall befall me ere this withereth quite away?" At this she turned from him to his silent companions, reached forth a hand to each, and they kneeling held them like the precious things they were.

"Good my friends," she murmured, to John's wonder seeming now all smiling tenderness, "ye that I loved as a child and that I think do love me, great need have I now of your love, more than ever was. For an this John man speak truth, of the which, alas, I have too certain proof, Pelynt and I and all of us do stand in direst peril. Thus have I commanded ye here with my Seneschal Sir Richard and Lord Gui of Brandonmere that we may take counsel how best to destroy this lurking menace. Now whiles we wait these lords, look ye on this John! Ye heard him declare how that he cometh from our enemy King Tristan; well, think ye he may be man to trust? Speak thou, Simon."

Now Simon, plucking at his beard, eyed John askance but as he thus hesitated, forth spoke Tomalyn:

"Noble lady, by your grace, I would trust him with my life! So let this right arm, nay this head o' mine, be hostage for his faith."

"And wherefore so assured, Tomalyn?"

"Lady, he adventured his life for mine, and thereto he showeth every deal a man and looketh out of honest eyen."

"And thou, Simon?"

"Lady, sithen well I wot Tomalyn no fool nowhen

but of ripe sapience; as he saith, so say I, that certes this fellow John shall prove man full worthy, noble lady."

"And yet," said she, "lo — see how this John ye praise me now hangeth head as your praise were shame! How is this, thou John?"

"For that I am no more than I am," he answered, "one to sing and jape and pluck as 'twere the sun from heaven —"

Then was rapping on the door and a voice low and soft speaking:

"Gui, Earl of Brandonmere, and the lord Seneschal crave audience, noble Lady, and Lord Julian of Weare."

CHAPTER XIV

TELLETH SOMEWHAT OF NIDGE THAT WAS A DWARF, AND HOW JOHN DISCOVERED OF LOVE ITS NATURE

SILENT and all unregarded stood John, watching these intent faces about the small table where lay the parchment map upon which the Duchess had laid one slim, expository finger, her beauteous features set once again to such expression of vengeful ferocity as reft from her all loveliness (thinks John); therefore glances he at the two other faces downbent so near her own, the first a comely visage aglow with clean youth and strong (thinks John), the second a handsome face, full-lipped, high-nosed and arrogant — a face to watch (thinks John); and from this the young prideful Lord of Weare, his keen gaze flits to the 'scarred features of Sir Richard, lord Seneschal of Pentavalon, this small, slim man, sober clad, who sits glaring at the parchment with his one eye and fingering his square, clean-shaven chin; and from him John's look wanders to where stand Tomalyn and Simon, side by side and very grim.

"Thus, see ye," said the Duchess, her flashing glance sweeping these faces, "and mark this — a flare on Wrykyn and 'tis the loftiest tower of the citadel — whoso made this fell thing knoweth our defences passing well, ay, and this my bower also. Thus is he manifest for one that goeth to and fro in our midst, a traitor all unsuspect."

"This of a verity!" nodded Sir Richard. "But for

the parchment, how is it certainly known to be contrived for Fitz-Urse? And not for King Tristan of Gerance?"

"John," said the Duchess, beckoning him. "Speak thou and tell on the hermit of St. Wynan's." So John repeated the tale and never a word spoken until he had made an end; then said young Gui, the Earl:

"And scarred o' the right cheek, was he? This doubtless shall be Piers of Deneholm, for 'twas I so marked him for dastard knight and liar —"

"And 'twas I," cried the Duchess fiercely, "'twas I would have hanged him that same hour but that thyself, my lord, and thou, Sir Richard, pleaded his life of me, wherefore I banished him, sparing his life. And now 'tis thus he would requite me — to so use me I should sue for death. Well, — henceforth shall be no more o' such mercy, I say; let me but find out these traitors and that hour death shall end their plotting."

"Certes, lady!" nodded Sir Richard. "Yet first to find them."

"Why, this shall be no great matter, Sire, for two methinks do stand self-confessed."

"Ha, sayst thou, madam?" quoth the young Earl. "Then beseech thee name them —"

"John," said she, "saw you the hand that sped dagger at your life?"

"Nay," he answered, "mine eyes were other where."

"Then you, Sir Richard, and ye, Simon and Tomalyn."

"Not I," answered Sir Richard. "I chanced to be watching this John fellow and saw naught but flash as the dagger smote."

"Nor I, alas," said Tomalyn and Simon together.

"Well, I saw," nodded the Duchess, "and can avow

yon murderous steel was launched by the hand of Raynald de Valence."

"Ha!" exclaimed Sir Richard. "Yet his sire was stout and trusty knight, and himself one of your noble father's esquires in years ago."

"And born here in Pentavalon!" quoth Tomalyn.

"Now wherefore," demanded the Duchess, glancing from face to face, "wherefore should De Valence seek to still John's tongue in death, except for dread of what John might say and discover against him? And why should he so fear John's word or any man's but that he is concerned in somewhat dark and evil?"

"On my faith," nodded Sir Richard, "'tis well argued and hath a seeming —"

"'Tis very sooth, Messires, I am persuaded. Wherefore tomorrow De Valence shall hang from the Wrykyn — nay, he shall first be put to the question by torture — ay, perchance the torment shall wring somewhat of truth from him —"

"Also perchance — lies!" murmured John.

"Be dumb, thou!" she cried angrily.

"My lady Ippolita," began the Earl, but she silenced him with a gesture and continued in voice fiercely implacable as her look:

"Then also the young fool Earl of Hartsmead was another foremost with his murderous steel. You remarked him, Sir Richard?"

"Ay, troth, lady, I did, but —"

"So will I have him likewise plagued to speech —"

"And here," quoth John, "I jingle thus:

"For thus, great lady, by thy grace
'Tis plain as nose upon thy face
All other plotters warned shall be —"

"Peace — ha, peace!" she cried, in pale fury. "Will ye then dare so defy me?"

"Nay, your Grace," says Sir Richard, "but to thine own good. For lo now, we know not how deep and far-reaching is this conspiracy, nor who the plotters or their power, and they, thus warned, may strike ere we be ready or flee beyond reach, to plot anew."

"And there spake wisdom!" quoth John.

"Yea, by my troth!" cried the young Earl heartily.

"Ay, but," murmured Lord Julian of Weare, "who is this John fellow, o' thy grace?"

"Oh, Messires," cried the Duchess, with gesture of angry scorn, "this John doth count himself man of cunning sleights and wily stratagems, a very guileful fellow! So John, be now thy wiliest; speak, man, but jingle not lest thou jingle in cell very presently."

"Why, then, sweet lady and fair lords, the case meseemeth is plainly thus. Here in your mighty Pentavalon be traitors — two of these we suspect; of their fellow plotters we nothing know. But these same two, alarmed by what befell at the council board, shall be spreading the tidings methinks, even as we sit here, wherefore, I guess, shall be troubled dreams and sleepless heads tonight, with an ever-waxing unease of mind. Well, let this fearful leaven work a while and we will in stealthy fashion fan this spark of fear to such flame of panic they must needs betray themselves —"

"Sayst thou?" quoth the Duchess. "And prithee, how shall we fan this spark o' thine?"

"In divers ways: by sudden marshalling of horse and foot at times unseasonable; by marchings and counter-marchings to no apparent purpose; by posting faithful eyes to watch and ears to hearken day and night, in especial, by night. Whiles do you, noble dame, seem

ever your most gracious self, free o' care and very debonair."

"Ay, and what of guileful John, meanwhiles?"

"By your fair grace, I shall go up and down and to and fro in your goodly city."

"Ha, like Sathanas, John!"

"Nay, as my poor self, lady, to strum and jingle my follies for such fools as care to hear, and I shall sing and strum, jingle and jape to some purpose —"

"Nay, good fellow," said the Earl, "this were to invite death to smite thee again, to set thyself a sure mark for creeping Murder —"

"Beau Sire, 'tis very like, sithen I am the lure for Treachery to stoop and strike at, the perambulating decoy, — but, mark this, Messire; whoso striketh at my life, discovers himself as enemy of your Duchess and Pelynt and is therefore to be close watched and followed till he bring ye to his fellow conspirators."

"Ha, and thyself dead, man John."

"'Tis peradventure, my good lord, and yet I think not, for Death full long hath been upon my heels and yet — I breathe. Indeed, I am not easily slain, my lord, God wot!"

"And lo, — here trumpeteth my boaster!" quoth the Duchess, nodding lovely head.

"Why, then," said the Earl of Brandonmere, rising, "noble Ippolita, an this be boasting, it liketh me passing well!" Then bowing to her, he came to John, viewing him very earnestly with youthful eyes aglow; said he:

"Sire John, fain would I know thee better." Answered John, with his wistful smile:

"My Lord of Brandonmere, 'tis very like you may."

"Except he suddenly die, alack!" murmured Lord Julian, smiling askance at watchful John.

"Well, Messires all," demanded the Duchess, "how think ye of his counsel?"

"Myself can devise none better," answered Sir Richard.

"Then, my lord Seneschal, so be it, hast a wise head and thy hands be strong and able as well, I weet, go use them to Pentavalon's safety. For you, my Lord of Brandonmere, send and marshal your array, yet bide you in the city. We meet all here again after vespers to report me your several doings, and so, my lords, God keep ye."

The grim old Seneschal bent his back to her stateliness, the comely young Earl knelt to kiss her hand, saluted John and backed away with Sir Richard, scarce heeding the graceful bow of lord Julian, who now fell on his knees before the Duchess (disdainful of all save herself), to take her hand, kissing it full oft and murmuring, softly amorous, while she looked down on him with eyes brightly steadfast beneath languour of drooping lashes, eyes so dispassionately curious that the eager, whispered words faltered on his lips and instead of ardent lover-like murmurs, he spake with an angry petulance:

"Ippolita, now by Venus, 'spite all the warm promise of thy sweet womanhood, art cold as ice, thy heart sleepeth —"

"And oh, the sad pity on't!" sighed she, her ruddy lips curving to strange, faint smile. "Yea, verily, my heart doth sleep very sound, Julian, a cold, numb thing, and no man in all this world with power to wake it, alas! And thou — thou art such learned and passionate wooer and right comely man as men go, Julian! And here is that doth trouble me, thy hottest wooing toucheth my heart no whit, thy humblest pleadings be

all vain! 'Stead of thus murmurous on thy knees, I like thee best astride a horse, hallooing to hawk and hound. So up with thee, my poor Julian, and 'stead of wooing get thee to Hugo my falconer and say I'm minded anon to try the newest cast of hawks. Up, my lord, and begone."

Lord Julian arose, frowned, groaned, smote clenched hand on heart, shook his handsome head despondently, sighed amain and departed. Then the Duchess laughed, but chancing to meet John's wistful regard, instantly frowned on him, and thereafter grew sad and turning to Simon and Tomalyn:

"Good my friends," she sighed plaintively, "let now your ears and eyes be diligent. Have ye also a care to this John man in his comings and goings, lest he suddenly vanish or die untimely; also as ye go bid my lord chamberlain see he lie in the tower chamber over this, henceforth. And so fare ye well until vespers. Well, why tarry ye?"

"For John, noble lady."

"Nay, he shall bide to sing me a while; wait you his coming, Tomalyn."

But when they were alone, the Duchess sat mute, gazing past John through the open window.

"Well?" she demanded at last, moving with a quick petulance, "wherefore must you stand so dumb?"

"For that without your gracious leave I may not sit."

"Then sit, man, sit and tell me o' thy vaunted wisdom — why should mine heart be thus numb and scornful of all man's love?"

"Because, as I guess, thou'rt destined to love with a full great and noble passion, lady."

"Here now is hateful thought and shameth me!"

"Yet shall it be mighty power some day, shall be thy glory and veriest joy, I dare to say."

"Ay, thou hast a daring tongue," said she, frowning; "well now, let it speak and rede me wherefore it is that despite my so many wooers, love is to me yet a stranger as it hath ever been, yea, and all unwanted?"

"Love that is true is shy thing and very sacred, my lady, a joy so mighty it is akin to pain, therefore he or she that loveth lightly, loving thus easily, loveth not truly."

"Ah, John," she laughed, yet viewing him with deep eyes adream, "thy so nimble tongue trippeth lightly and very loverlike. Can it speak me any more of love?"

"An infinite deal, Ippolita, for love that is enduring cometh of the Infinite and loveth but for Love's sake, soaring high above cold Reason; and, loving once, loveth forever, since such love reacheth beyond Death's very self."

"Now dost paint me such a love, John, I'd fain have thee make of it a song, yea — shall sing it forth-right —"

"High Mightiness, I had liefer be about my business."

"Why, what other business hast thou — thou, my Jingling John?"

"Gracious lady, no more than the saving of Pelynt."

"How, — and thyself its saviour — thou?"

"E'en I, lady, by God his aid."

"You prate overmuch of holy things!" quoth she scornfully. "Take now yon harp of mine and sing me."

"My lady Ippolita," he answered, "you shall read in the chronicles how King Nero twanged harp whiles Rome burned. Now as for this —" he paused suddenly, for beside the door the tapestry had stirred and this door stood ajar. So up started John, lean hand clutching at girdle for the dagger that was not; none the

less he sprang and, twitching aside this betraying curtain, recoiled as forth of its shadow leapt something shrill-squealing, a small antic shape that rolled, head over heels, bounded afoot, turned a pirouette and struck a posture; a creature this scarce three feet high, that wriggled squat body on short, bowed legs, flapped shorter arms and, nodding large head, thrust tongue in cheek to wink and leer and squeak again in shrill laughter. Chin in fist, John stared down on this dwarf whose cruel deformity was offset by splendour of raiment, and who glared up at speechless John with eyes that goggled neath pent of thick brows. Now, looking from one to other, the Duchess laughed.

“How then, right valiant John, doth this poor atomy so affright thee? ’Tis but Nidge, the dwarf I had of my lord Julian — ”

“Sayst thou, lady? Of the lord Julian, ha — this arrogant lording that would dower thee with himself and himself with thy Duchy?”

“And wherefore not?” she demanded, frowning. “Julian is noble, a comely man, a man of prideful spirit, in fine a very man — ”

“Ay, faith, madam, and one that would win to power and by wedlock, valiant soul!”

“Well, and wherefore not?” she repeated. “Since my counsellors would have me wed some man within the year, — wherefore not this man?”

“And wherefore not t’other,” quoth John gravely, “the golden man sweet with clean youth and reverent love, this Gui, Earl of Brandonmere?”

“Nay, he is lover so slavish and merely humbly woos me as I were holy angel ’stead of very woman — ”

“Ay, faith,” nodded John, “and he shall be fool lover that humbly woos and reverent kneels to such mere woman when he hath arms to snatch her to his

breast, God wot! But of this rogueling imp now, this pettyman that may creep and crouch unseen — ”

“Ay, ay, Nidge am I!” squealed the little creature, cutting a caper very nimbly. “And Nidge hath ears, aha, and eyes shall see thee dead anon, carrion to rot and rot, aha, oho!”

“Hum!” quoth John. “’Tis a cheery imp and a right jovial sprite, redolent o’ the charnel house, so by thy gracious leave, I’ll out and walk me yonder i’ the sun,” and turning short on his heel, John strode forth of this luxurious chamber, out upon the broad terrace and down marble steps into the flowery garden below, here to walk slow and pensive a while, chin on breast. Now presently in his wandering he came where stood the great fountain in the midst of this fair garden, jetting water and spraying rainbows in the sun; a wide marble basin supported by fauns and satyrs wondrously wrought and carved. Very slowly John walked round about the fountain, chin on breast but eyes very keen and watchful ’neath drawn brows.

Having thus viewed the fountain all about, he went on, slow pacing, like one at idle haphazard, though his glance quested here and there, until at last he came to that secluded corner where, hard beside the massy wall, stood a little age-worn chapel or oratory, a dim place and bare, save for the great carven rood that stretched chiselled arms above the high altar.

Now before the altar knelt one who prayed very fervently with many sighs and tears, her clasped hands upraised to the cross in fervent supplication; and John saw she was young and of a dark and gentle beauty. And presently, in the passion of her praying, she spake aloud:

“. . . therefore O Mother of Tender Pity, if . . .

if he be dead, intercede that his sin be soon atoned and his soul win to everlasting peace. . . . But O Blessed Mother, if he be yet in life . . . suffer that my Raymond may come back to be lord of me at last, though I wait him all my days."

Then came John soft treading and knelt reverently beside her, and she beholding him thus suddenly, started and viewing him large-eyed, spoke him whispering: "Who art thou?"

Answered John as softly:

"One who comes, it seems, in answer to thy prayer, for Lady, thy lord is alive and safe. Raymond, Earl of Fordham Shene, liveth hale and well."

"Alive?" she gasped. "Alive? Now do I thank our God of mercy. . . . And alive? Ah, now I pray thee tell me of him. Is he indeed hale and well?"

"Indeed, lady. So full o' life he languisheth for his dear lady Adelisa as true lover should."

"And dost know my name, strange man? But how? Nay, 'tis no matter. Of Raymond tell me . . . more, more, all thou mayst. How looked he? What said he? Where met ye — whither goeth he . . . oh, Messire, prithee speak."

"Then come you forth to the jocund sun, lady, and I will match his gladness with my tale." So saying, John took her slim hand and led her from that sad, dim place into the joyous daylight; and seated in secluded corner, remote from chance espial, yet whence he might watch the garden, recounted his meeting with the young Earl and of all that had chanced between them, while the lovely Adelisa sat, eyes wide, rosy lips apart, oft sighing yet speaking not until John's tale was ended. Even then she was mute a while, chin in hand, slim brows knit in a pretty perplexity.

"Why, then," said she at length, "here was no sacrilege, no felon stroke at holy priest before God's holy altar!"

"So saith thy Raymond, lady, and 'tis a credible youth."

"And yet Dom Gregorius telleth very other story, vowing that as in dark of night he knelt praying in yon chapel, even there Raymond leapt with murderous steel and smote at his life with sacrilegious hand. . . . This is the tale he tells and he a holy man and reverend friar —"

"And still, methinks, lady, a very liar."

"Oh, be thanked for this!" cried she, reaching him her hand. "For thus think I too, yet dare not say as much, alas, least of all to the Duchess, for since Raymond is fled, her faith is in Friar Gregorius."

"Thus do I grow the more fain to see and speak with him," said John, his sharp eyes questing wide garden and lofty towers and battlements beyond. "Cometh he often here about?"

"Not of late," she answered, viewing John with quick, appraising eyes, his leathern garments frayed and torn, his slim hands, sensitive mouth, the bright, steadfast eyes of him and high bold carriage of his head. "Now of thyself — thou'rt strange here?"

"Indeed, lady, mere wandering gleeman I, a trouvère errant and poor singer of indifferent rhymes; the Duchess nameth me Jingling John."

"And yet thy face, thy every gesture, proclaims thy gentlehood. And so, Messire, Adelisa of Stowe doth greet thee well and fain would speak her gratitude, — oh, yonder steppeth Nidge, that little hatefulness."

"I see him," quoth John, "and yet thing to pity."

"Nay, Messire, 'tis small, fiendly thing, a wanton

elf and wicked . . . ay, and grown man, despite his lack of size; by his contriving, as I think, my loved Ippolita might have perished by fire — ”

“Ha, sayst thou, my lady Adelisa? Art sure o’ this?”

“Nay — not sure . . . though when the tapestry burst aflame, I espied Nidge stealing furtive adown the stair.”

“Hum!” quoth John, chin in fist. “This breedeth question as to who should set him to such murderous prank.”

“Nay, Messire, who in all Pelynt would so harm our loved Duchess? This was but wicked prank of his own small, black heart.”

“Ay, belike,” nodded John. “But now . . . the fountain yonder! Such small creature might lie hid ’neath the wide basin, crouched twixt carven faun and nymph to peep and hearken all unseen — ha?”

“Indeed, Messire, I have known him hide so there and leap forth to scream and fright poor me, ere now.”

“So ho!” quoth John softly. “The sooner this little rogue-sprite vanish, the better.”

“Ah, would he might!” sighed Adelisa fervently. “Or that Ippolita would send him back to my lord.”

“Ay, she hath a many wooers, I guess.”

“Beyond count, yet chiefest two.”

“And which, think you, is she likeliest to wed?”

“Either or neither, Messire. For though formed and made for love, Ippolita is yet to love a stranger.”

“But, lady, how canst be sure of this?”

“Oh, Messire, I have loved her all our days. We were children together and today, though she be woman and potent duchess, I know her heart — nor doth she seek to hide it from me. For, but yesternight, as we lay to sleep, ‘Adelisa,’ sighs she, ‘I love not men — nay, truly

I despise them, yet could I but find — *the* man, ah, then him would I follow, were he poor, despised, a very beggar; him would I follow to the world's end and — beyond!" And such is my Ippolita and so it is I do so love her."

"Faith now, my lady Adelisa, —" he began and sat dumb as into this quiet garden strode Tomalyn armed, his ring mail aclink, and who, espying John as he rose, beckoned, striding to and fro like man distraught.

"Lady, by your grace," said John and coming where Tomalyn clinked to and fro, grasped his arm, saying:

"Comrade, what now?"

"John," said Tomalyn, harsh whispering, "Oh, John, this fiendly thing we wot of, thou and I, yon goblin damned that haunteth Hangstone Waste, hath struck again . . . young Aylric is dead that was but late of the Duchess her household! We found him hanging on a tree, his young body all ripped by devil claws . . . and oh, John man, how shall I tell this to our lady?"

"Softly, Tomalyn. Be mum a while. Say nought but — do! Act first and speak after."

"Ay, John, this hour I marshal my foresters — yet an I do, it shall be known and the Duchess make enquiry — and fall to fury o' passion and clap me in dungeon, like as not."

"Then marshal never a man."

"But how then, John, what mean you?"

"Tonight, Tomalyn, thou and I and three others, lusty men all, will to Hangstone right stealthily and there make an end of Terror — or die for it."

"Ay, but of these three men, John, what and who —?"

"Come with me and learn."

CHAPTER XV

TELLETH HOW THEY SWARE AN OATH

AT the bend of a narrow street, crouched within shadow of the mighty city wall, stood the tavern named Black Dog: a small hostry steep of roof, small of window and narrow of door, which last stood wide, the day being hot. Now beside the door upon stout oaken bench sprawled mighty Watkyn fondling an alepot and scowling blackly on his comrade Walter de Benyon, who, gazing dreamful on vacancy, sighed deep and oft, sipping daintily at goblet of wine; and when he had thus alternate sighed and sipped, he spake tenderly murmurous:

“Lo now, man Wat, I mope and pine; there is strange heaviness upon me —”

“Ay, ’neath thy girdle,” quoth mighty Wat; “shouldst quaff honest ale, stead o’ thy vinous swash.”

“Ay de me!” sighed Walter into his goblet. “Fain would the soul o’ me its silent pinions spread and waft o’er battled wall, e’en to Saint Wynan’s Well.”

“And whyfore there?”

“For that ’tis thereabouts bloometh shy she-creature, beauteous as dewy dayspring, of a sweet innocence, a fragrant flower —”

“Then is she not for thee!” quoth Wat.

“Alack and so I pine!” sighed Walter. “To sightful lack and, lacking, sigh for mine unworthiness! Ha, gentle Watkyn, hast ne’er felt thy gross carcass a cumbrance foul and vile as it now showeth?”

"Not I!" growled Wat. "I am forsooth a goodly man, by Nature formed in God His image according unto Holy Writ, and as for my vileness, all flesh is vile and vilest of any thy flesh, *quod erat demonstrandum*, comrade!"

"Agreed," sighed Walter, glancing down at his slim, buskined legs. "Mine own vileness is agreed, thou yawpish pest, — for she I do love is damozel so purely good, so very nigh the holy angels, that my love for her hath wrought me to such humility my vileness is unto myself right manifest and therefore here avowed."

"Now by the Ten Bones," quoth Wat, staring in vasty amaze, "this meekness, so out o' thy nature, speaketh thee out o' thyself and smacks o' fiendly brimstone and accursed magic."

"Never think it so, Wat-fool; this engendered is of purest passion of love."

"Nay, 'tis witchcraft fell —"

"And her sweet name is Brynda, sweet as herself! Y-clad goeth she in loveliness . . . tripping on small, pretty feet . . . and singeth! Oh, man Wat, she singeth sweet and full-throated as any piping merle."

"And the fly," growled Wat, "the fly saith buzz and I drink a plague on all female spells o' thy Brynda —" Out shot Walter's fist and away clattered Watkyn's pot, spilling the noble ale broadcast.

"Thou," snarled Walter, "thou hoggish lump! Thou shape o' large beastliness, in thy besotted dispraisal of my unworthy self I humbly accord — but that thy guzzling, swinish mouth belch blasphemies on her name — ! Ha, meekness, fly! Heave up thou bulk, that with this sweet steel I may purge the world o' thee!" Up leapt nimble Walter and out flashed his eager sword,

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whereat tall Wat but wagged great head, growling:

“Peace, thou paltry demi-man, peace now lest I blow and puff thee into nothingness.”

“Up!” snarled Walter. “Up and to it forthright or by the Blessed Rood thy base blood shall foul my knightly steel!” Then Watkyn was afoot and, despite his mighty stature, nimble well-nigh as Walter’s nimble self; but as they fronted each other, brandished swords aglitter, forth of the inn hasted gloomy Thurstan and sighing, stepped between.

“Abate ye now, abate!” quoth he plaintively. “Put up and keep your steel to better purpose! Shame on ye both, and stint these foolish clamours. Are ye not brethren o’ the sword, sworn upon the good iron i’ the jolly greenwood neath oak and ash and thorn, brothers ye to honour and serve each the other? And will ye be forever yapping on each other like lewd curdogs?”

“Nay but,” cried Wat, “this puny spindleshanks would dare me — ”

“And did not this same Walter twice save thee from death?”

“Ay, I did,” quoth Walter. “The more fool I!”

“And did not Wat here ward thy body with his own, and once in thy sickness nurse thee back to health?”

“That did I!” snarled Wat. “And to my present dole!”

“Then be ye in amity or — ” A familiar voice hailed and turning they beheld John, armed in glittering mail, and with him Tomalyn, who stood frowning upon their naked swords.

“How then, must ye be for ever at it!” cried John, frowning also.

“Ay, faith!” nodded Thurstan, “some day, an none

be nigh to part 'em, these loggerheads shall slay each other and die forsworn."

"Ha' done!" said John, coming nearer. "Sheathe your swords, for this night in Hangstone Waste they shall, I pray, find better work."

"I' the Hangstone Waste?" cried Walter. "Ha, John, thy words are sweet music —"

"Softly, man, be hushed now and come where we may talk privily."

Stooping their heads to the low-arched doorway they followed Walter into a small room, an inner chamber and therefore very ill lit; and here, seated at massy table, John spake them soft-voiced.

"First, brethren all, look ye on this Tomalyn and know him for very man honoured and loved of the Duchess Ippolita for life of faithful service. Tomalyn, behold thou these my comrades three, sworn to brotherhood on the steel, men all of desperate fortunes and, be reason of ancient wrongs, seeming other than they are. Now the Duchess hath sore need of us, God wot, so whiles we bide in Pelynt, let us swear a fealty oath to her and to each other!" So speaking, John drew his sword and laying it on the table, set his hand upon the blade as did the others also, saying together:

"We swear this on the good, cold iron."

Then at John's behest Tomalyn, hoarse whispering, made relation of all that had chanced of late and of his own doubts and fears of creeping murder and hidden treachery; and after him John took up the story, setting forth all that he knew for very truth of the perils that threatened Ippolita and her duchy, and something of the stealthy menace that he suspected, while the mighty three, leaning near, hearkened, fierce-eyed or grim-smiling.

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“For true it is,” John ended, “the Bear is up, Fulk Fitz-Urse is astir, and we five alone do front the menace of him; for this great duchy, proud in her might yet slumbers in seeming security. And thus it is, brethren all, that we five, knowing what we know, and suspecting more, must use such wit as God hath given us, must be ever watchful, and whenso we smite, — smite hard and sure, lest Pelynt fall and the valiant Duchess perish right shamefully. Henceforth, though she witteth naught of us, the wardens of her body we ’gainst lurking dangers and Treachery that creeps i’ the dark. And this night in the Hangstone Waste we make beginning. How say ye?”

“That my woeful life is not endured in vain!” sighed Thurstan.

“Ho, John,” laughed Walter, clapping hand to sword, “when I smite, it shall be sure and hard enow, I will be sworn — ”

“I would it were night!” quoth Wat.

“ ’Twill come, my Watkyn, ’twill come anon!” jibed Walter, “and when this fiendly monster hath his claws i’ thy poor carcass, roar thou on thy Walter and Walter shall deliver thee — ”

“And now,” said John, doffing steel headpiece, “let us eat whiles we may.”

CHAPTER XVI

SHOWETH HOW THEY TOOK COUNSEL

Now while they supped together, they took counsel in this wise:

JOHN: Of this Hangstone Waste. Tell us, friend Tomalyn, how long hath it been thus haunted and dæmon-rid?"

TOMALYN: Ever and always, 'tis said.

JOHN: Ay, by such harmless elves as flitting Jack-o'-Lanthorn and dancing Will-o'-the-Wisp. But since when have folk died there in such evil sort, — ripped by claws i' the dark?

TOMALYN: Why, the first as I do mind was one Eric a charcoal burner, his poor body so rent and —

JOHN: Ay, but when was this?

TOMALYN: Scarce six months ago.

JOHN: Ha! So short a while?

TOMALYN: Truly. But since then the Waste hath been worser devil-rid than o' yore.

JOHN: Ay, but how? Beside this monster, how is the place haunted?

TOMALYN: By sparks o' fire, John. By devil fires and flames, ay, I ha' seen the very glare of Hell upshooting from the riven earth.

JOHN: Sawest thou all this in very truth, Tomalyn?

TOMALYN: Ay, John, this did I and others with me. Oh, I tell ye, comrades, the quaking earth gaped wide on Hell, spewing forth flames o' fire, a fell, unholy glare to blast man's sight and sear his very soul!

Now at this, Thurstan crossed himself devoutly, Walter, forgetting to smile, murmured on Saint Guth-

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lac's name very piously; even mighty Wat recoiled and glared up fearfully across wide shoulder towards shadowy corner and started violently at John's sudden question:

JOHN: And all this ye saw, Tomalyn?

TOMALYN: I and three others, John, lying hid i' the brush. I can show ye all the very place.

JOHN: And heard ye aught?

TOMALYN: Nay, comrade, I do confess we stayed not nor tarried in our going.

JOHN: Howbeit, all this ye saw and — your eyes were not blasted, Tomalyn, nor the eyes o' your fellows, ha?

TOMALYN: Well — no, John, but —

JOHN: And your soul, I guess, sits in thee scathless! Now let us put it thus: Thou, friend Tomalyn, peering down upon this place o' doom and dread in dark of night, and thy fearful soul aquake with dire expectancy, saw — a beam of light shoot upward from the earth, — this and no more.

TOMALYN: Nay, but was not this sight to chill the blood, freeze the marrow, — a sight o' dreadful omen?

JOHN: Ay, by my soul! 'Twas verily sight o' such dire omen must nerve us to encounter all we must this very night by craft o' wit and strength of arm, in fashion right desperate.

WATKYN: Ay, ay, right so!

WALTER: But what meanest thou, John?

THURSTAN: Speak us, John. Howbeit, we'll follow thee.

JOHN: I mean, and brethren, mark me well: when, like rats, men do burrow and dig in the earth by night, to stealthy purpose, they must needs have light whereby so to do —

TOMALYN: Aha, a sap — a mine! Angels o' grace, can this be?

JOHN: 'Tis so I judge, for doth not the mighty Lion Tower front upon Hangstone Waste?

TOMALYN: Ay, the Lion Tower . . . now God and the saints defend us!

JOHN: Amen! For, once the Lion fall, crashing thunderous at dead o' night, say, — then Fitz-Urse, couched embattled in Hangstone Waste, hath but to leap — a single charge and Pentavalon falleth too in blood and flame, and therewith this great Duchy of Pelynt.

TOMALYN: Nay, this were impossible, for in mighty Pelynt be thousands, valiant and lusty men all —

JOHN: Yet all these valiant thousands do lie e'en now in helpless slumber, whiles death steals furtive on them per Hangstone Waste, an I judge truly. Thus to-night, twixt Fulk Fitz-Urse and this red havoc of slaughter and destruction stand no more than we five. Therefore must we so act, so think and do, that these sleeping thousands shall wake betimes and stand to their own deliverance.

TOMALYN: Ha, that shall they and presently — tomorrow the alarm shall fly and all Pelynt march out arrayed 'gainst cursed Fulk in High Morven —

JOHN: Not so. Fitz-Urse must march on Pelynt even as he doth purpose, and by the Hangstone Waste, for there must we lure him to his own destruction.

THURSTAN: Oh, thrice blessed, happy day!

TOMALYN: Ay, but how shall this achieve?

JOHN: This will I tell ye anon. But see, night creepeth apace! And mark this, when we shall come nigh Hangstone, let no man speak above his breath. There lying hid we must watch nor stir, whatsoever chance, except I bid ye, even though we watch out the night. Is't understood? So! Go now and arm ye, for with blink o' night we go to adventure whatso we must.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW THEY SMOTE THE TERROR OF HANGSTONE WASTE

THE moon was not yet risen and about them a world all dark when, guided by Tomalyn, they reached a place of trees and dense thickets whence they might look down upon the grim desolation of Hangstone Waste. A place of dread and ominous silence, for there was no breath of wind; a place that gloomed darker than the night yet astir with pale shapes of ghostly mist that rolled sluggish above the black bosom of the silent mere.

And, still as the waters of this dread mere, silent as the black void below, the five lay watchful, waiting for whatso should betide. At last spake John, whispering:

“Hear ye aught?”

“Not I,” whispered Tomalyn.

“Nor I!” breathed Thurstan.

“Ay, but I do!” murmured Walter. “Hearkee — ears to the ling.”

A faint throbbing that rose and fell. A tapping that had no rhythm and yet persisted.

“Pickaxes!” growled Wat. “They labour underground. Let’s at ’em!”

“Patience!” whispered John, then turning, spake in Tomalyn’s ear: “Go thou some ways hence and make stir, jingle thy harness and give a muttering.”

So away crept Tomalyn, a flittering, silent shape, while four pairs of ears strained for expected sound of him, and after some while it came, rustle of leaves,

a jingle, a hoarse murmuring, stealthy sounds yet plain to hear. Now scarce had they died away than from the darkness below rose the shrill hoot of an owl, thrice repeated. And presently thereafter upon this blackness came a faint glow that brightened to sudden upstreaming shaft of light, dimmed as suddenly, yet sufficient to show vague forms seen but to vanish as this feeble light was extinguished.

"Now!" whispered fierce Wat. "Down at 'em —"

"Be still!" hissed John, gripping him fast. And so was silence again, save for the rustle of stealthy going below and this presently hushed.

"Ha, they ha' 'scaped us!" growled Wat.

"And so they must!" quoth John.

"And what o' this clawsome demon, this fiendly monster —?"

"Oh, be patient, man! Bide silent and stir not, lest all shall fail by reason o' thee!"

At last up rose the moon, a thin sickle of radiance, whence came a soft light that showed things but vaguely, — a down-sweep of brush and stunted trees lost in glooming shadows whence towered the great jagged rock that o'erhung that stilly mere, and beyond all this the grey mass of Pentavalon's walls and battlements with foremost the huge, distant bulk of the soaring Lion Tower.

"Now!" murmured John, rising. "Come ye and tread warily." And drawing sword, he began to descend into the menacing hush of Hangstone Waste.

Silent went they save for the whisper of their cautious footsteps and faint jingle of their ring mail; down and down until, reaching the grassy level, John paused in the deep shadow of an ancient twisted tree to peer and listen. And sudden, dreadful, forth of this

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shadow Terror leapt among them, smiting John headlong; ere he could rise, Walter o'erleapt him with eager sword, only to be caught up and whirled aside; then sprang mighty Watkyn, but, ere he could smite, his ponderous axe was wrenched and tossed away and himself stricken to his knees; so came Tomalyn and Thurstan side by side, were seized, smitten together and together dropped insensate. Then, with thin, piping screech, this scarce-glimpsed monster was off and away at shambling run; but Wat had risen and his long legs were bearing him in fleet pursuit.

Now after some while John sat up, got to his feet and came where lay Thurstan and Tomalyn, gasping together and groaning, and as he stooped to peer down at them, came Walter, limping mighty disconsolate, very scant of breath yet speechful.

"Ho, John man . . . ho, John, here was . . . very fiend o' the pit! Sathanas himself beyond doubting . . . or . . . old Guttler here had . . . been through his loathly carcass, 'stead o' the which . . . he smites me . . . heel over head . . . with hellish thunderbolt! And our good comrades alack, . . . all devil-smit and like to perish . . . for how shall mortal man, even a De Benyon, avail 'gainst brimstone pigwidgeon or goblin damned? 'Tis out o' nature . . . ha, dost breathe yet, my gentle Tomalyn . . . and Thurstan eke? Now would I burn fat taper to the sweet Saint Guthlac, had I taper to burn, but — ha, holy saints defend us — see yonder!"

Now looking whither he pointed, they beheld that which held them thrall'd, peering up wide of eye and breath in check, for high above them, on very pinnacle of Hangstone Crag, Wat and the monster strove in furious grapple, two dim shapes that yet seemed but

one, so close they fought, bending and swaying this way and that, a reeling bulk against the faint moon until, or ever these dumb watchers might stir, — down plunged they from that dizzy height, still fast grappled, to drop together into the dark waters of the mere that shivered to mighty splash and closing above them, rippled and was silent again.

Then Walter groaned and began to run thither, and ever as he ran he sobbed, panting alternate prayers and curses; and with him ran his fellows.

So came they breathless to the mere's sedgy marge and halting there, gazed down into those black and awful deeps. Sudden, crying on Watkyn's name, Walter tossed aside cumbrous headpiece, loosed off belt and sword and would have leaped, but John's powerful arms restrained him.

"Let be, John — let be!" he panted, striving. "My comrade Wat is down in yon foul deep . . . my brother sworn, so must I to him."

"Not so!" cried John, as they wrestled. "If Wat be gone indeed, how shall thy death avail him now . . . a died to right good purpose and — ha, lo yonder! The mere! What thing of evil — ?" He pointed dumbly where up from those gloomy waters rose a great, gleaming claw . . . a mailed hand that grappled it; then came long upstretching arm, a gleaming headpiece and Wat's pale face, eyes that stared wildly, gaping mouth that puffed and blew amain. Then they had seized and dragged him safe to land and lying half asworn, he glared on the moon and spake them, gasping:

"Yon was . . . no demon . . . a man-beast . . . and lo . . . his claw . . . of iron, see ye . . . cunningly wrought . . . oh, sharp!" Silently the four

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stood gazing down on this dreadful thing of death, none touching it.

“Ha — so!” cried Tomalyn at last. “’Tis foul, accursed thing hath wrought death on many a goodly wight — down to Hell with ’t!” And snatching up this ghastly thing, he hove it far to splash down into those grim waters where now lay that strange, dread creature that was to haunt and slay in Hangstone Waste never more.

And presently, when Wat was able, they went to and fro, questing and casting about like hounds on the scent until, the moon serving, they came on that they sought so diligently, and this a narrow opening cut in the earth, an adit cunningly hid. Striking flint and steel, John lit the torch he had brought and by its light led the way into a tunnel that sloped gently downwards and was shored up by timbering until at last this close burrow widened, and here the flickering torch showed them riven masonry, great stones broken and displaced and fallen rubble with great props and supporting beams.

“God ha’ mercy!” cried Tomalyn, wiping sweat from furrowed brow. “These be the foundations o’ the Lion Tower!”

“Nay, these were!” sighed John, chin in hand. “Now, alas, ’stead of honest stone, see ye these props o’ wood that, smeared with pitch and fat of hogs, shall burn right merrily, for all their size, and presently where now standeth your mighty Lion Tower shall be tumbled ruin — ay, Tomalyn, a breach whereby an army might win, at midnight say, and Pentavalon be aflame within an hour.”

“Oh, sweet saints forfend! Ha, John, let’s away — let us to the Duchess and alarm the city.”

"Softly, comrade! This mine is nowise ready nor shall be this week and more, and as for the Duchess, I charge thee speak her no word o' this —"

"How?" cried Tomalyn. "Be dumb, sayst thou? Pelynt thus threatened and yet speak not of it and to our gracious valiant lady? Cog's body, John, wherefore and why?"

"Let us forth of this rathole and shalt hear." So back and up went they forthwith, into the fresh night air, and obedient to John's word they climbed the steep until the gloom of Hangstone Waste lay below them and behind. But scarce had they reached the level sward than was glint of mail, and against them rode two horsemen completely armed, but they wore open basinets; thus as they approached John knew them for Sir Richard the Seneschal and young Gui, Earl of Brandonmere.

"What, is't thyself, good Tomalyn?" demanded Sir Richard, reining up.

"In troth," cried Tomalyn, advancing, "my lord Seneschal, and oho, glory be to every blessed saint, Hangstone is made clean; this ogreish beast, this ravening monster is dead — drowned deep within the mere!" And forthwith he told right joyfully all that had chanced. The tale ended, Sir Richard beckoned Watkyn near, viewing him up and down, his mighty form and comely though sullen face; and meeting the shrewd glance of this one eye, tall Watkyn smiled and made knightly salutation.

"So, thou art Wat?" said the Seneschal.

"'Tis so they name me, though Wat but my ekename is. I had better upon a day."

"And shalt again, Messire Wat! Others shall come to honour thee as now do I. Wear this for me!" And

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from beneath his surcoat the Seneschal drew a golden chain and set it about Wat's brawny throat. "Verily our lady Duchess needeth the like o' ye."

"Then lord," quoth John, "here stand we ready and willing to her service, as shall now be further proven." And beckoning to Walter and Thurstan he spoke their names; and to each Sir Richard gave his hand. "And now," saith John, "light you down, my fair lords, and we will show ye somewhat."

CHAPTER XVIII

TELLETH HOW FIVE RODE FORTH

IN leafy dingle well hid from chance espial, where a small brook gurgled, sparkling to faint moonbeam, they sat close, seven men who spake soft-voiced.

“And wherefore,” demanded the Seneschal, peering at John with his single bright eye, “wherefore no word o’ this to our Duchess?”

Answered John:

“Lord, for that she is, as you wot, fiery lady so passionate, of such proud and valiant spirit she shall instant leap to war, ay — like as not, herself ride mailed in your van.”

“Well and good!” exclaimed Earl Gui. “The sooner we march embattled to purge High Morven by fire, the better for this world, I trow.”

“Nay, my lord,” answered John, shaking his head, “for an you so do — alas, then presently ’bove your mighty cities and walled towns, ’stead o’ the leopard banner of Pelynt shall fly the standard of the Bear! For sure it is — ”

“Fitz-Urse?” quoth the young Earl in high scorn. “Such thought were folly, ay, and I hold it black treason to so pronounce! I tell thee, could we but meet Fitz-Urse in open fight, we could sweep him beyond Morven to the sea.”

“Indeed, my lord Gui, this is beyond all peradventure, but — Fitz-Urse shall never front Pelynt’s might in open field. For to my mind — ”

“Nay, nay,” cried the Earl, with youthful petulance,

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“thou’rt likely man, a fellow quick o’ wit, but war and such knightly ploys is not for thy judgment — ”

“Hold, Gui lad,” quoth the Seneschal mildly. “I’m fain to hear this man. Speak me thy mind, John!”

“Forthright, my masters all, as thus,” answered John. “Pelynt is mighty and rich; High Morven, though secure haven, is little and poor. Therefore Fulk lusteth for Pelynt and her proud Duchess. But in open field, man for man, Fulk may never cope with the marshalled thousands of Pelynt and this Fulk knoweth, being wise in war, and shall never dare ye in open fight. Now, and oh, mark this, sirs, — should Pelynt march her powers forth against High Morven, Fulk, rejoicing, shall countermarch stealthily and, bursting on Pentavalon like thunderbolt whiles Ippolita ravages High Morven, shall make himself Lord of Pelynt; once master of Pentavalon and your other walled cities, no power on earth shall drive him forth.”

“*Quod erat demonstrandum!*” exclaimed Wat.

“Well, my lord?” questioned the Seneschal. “How sayst thou to this, Gui?”

The young Earl rubbed smooth chin, frowned, shook his head and rose.

“I’ll away to bed, Sir Richard,” quoth he, “for the Duchess hunts tomorrow and will ride forth early.”

“How?” cried John, starting afoot. “Is she yet determined on this folly?”

“Folly?” repeated the Earl, in angry amaze. “Dare ye so say?”

“And dare ye not?” quoth John. “Ye that are lords of her council and trusted friends, can ye by no means prevail on her to bide close what time these stealthy perils menace?”

“Nay, John, methinks you do something magnify

these dangers," said the Seneschal, though his look was troubled. "She goeth surrounded by her lords and ladies and Tomalyn's verderers . . . and likewise an armed escort . . ."

"Moreover," nodded the young Earl, "I shall ride ever beside her! And this is Pelynt, so what harm may touch her?"

"Well," answered John, "a sly arrow aimed from the boskage and she is dead! Or sudden attack in remote glade, her own company scattered, and she is borne away to such vile harms I shall not utter. Think, my lords, think on these evils that may be, and act forthright. For if in your minds is smallest fear of such danger to your Duchess, then mount, sirs, and away to her. Speak her your doubts; ay, speak very plain, lest, being now dumb, you rue it bitterly one day."

The young Earl made three strides where his horse cropped grass hard by, and four paces back again.

"John man," quoth he, "my lord Seneschal and I did venture to speak some such warning this very day but . . . she mocked our fears. . . . Ippolita's will is to hunt, scorning all danger . . . for in the tender shape of her dwelleth spirit fiercely resolute, ay, like the Duke her sire."

"Ay, truly!" sighed the Seneschal. "Though the Duke was ever wise in his valiance. Howbeit, we will to her Grace yet again —"

"But at this hour?" exclaimed the Earl. "How an she be asleep?"

"She shall wake and hear!" answered the Seneschal, mounting to saddle. "Come all, — ay, every man, for ye that have wrought so well this night shall find good service and fair lodgement in Pentavalon henceforth. Come ye!"

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So saying, the Seneschal rode forward with Earl Gui beside him and after these strode John and the four through a dim world growing ever more vague, for the moon was failing.

"By Saint Guthlac," said Walter at last in John's ear, "this same Duchess would seem a very redoubtable lady, a dame indomitable, or yon proud lords should not look so hangdog, so cowed and qualmish. Ay, 'tis peevish, wilful maid and needeth man o' mastery to her manage, a very man to tame and gentle her with ferocity o' love; but alas, poor lady, I am heart-smit already, so needs do I leave her to thee, John."

"Now what wild, ranting folly is this?"

"Truth, John, and therefore wisdom. For all we De Benyons were born with a gift for women and therefore arrant lovers and I the last. Thus do I know. And she is beauteous lady and thou a properest man, John, and she, the poor soul, with so many lordly wooers to woo in fashion lordly, yearneth for simple man. Snatch and have at her, John; let thine arms compel, thine eyes summon, thy strength o'erween and win to thyself spouse passionately submissive, and a mighty dukedom. How sayst thou?"

"The saints forfend!" answered John, wry-smiling. "And thy lawless tongue waggeth like clack o' mill, Walter!"

"Yet a nimble tongue hath magic to make journeys short, so be thankful to mine, for lo, yonder is the city!" And he pointed where, beyond the up-winding forest road, loomed the walls and towers of Pentavalon. "A city of rare might, John?"

"Ay, faith!" sighed John. "Once Fitz-Urse creep within those walls, all Pelynt is lost." They came at last to the city gates set deep between massive flank-

ing towers, whence spearheads winked faintly and a harsh voice challenged them, answered by the Seneschal's clear hail; whereupon up creaked heavy portcullis, and with rumbling clash of bolt, bars and chain, the great gates swung wide upon mailed forms and smoking torch glare. By narrow alleys, by silent crooked streets and echoing square, they came to the citadel and crossed the drawbridge into this the city's last and mightiest defence. Here Simon met them with divers of his archer guard and here the Earl and Sir Richard dismounted and, beckoning John, hasted across the shadowy garden and so to a hall of audience where men-at-arms stood nodding sleepily on their wards and a courtly youth, richly arrayed and yawning amain, sprawled in great chair at the wide hearth; but who at sound of mailed feet started about in sleepy amaze.

"How then, Sir Huon," quoth the Seneschal; "do ye all sleep?"

"Not so, Messire," answered the young knight, rising very nimbly. "But, my gracious lords, what would ye at such dead hour?"

"Have word with the Duchess."

"Nay, Sir Richard, she sleeps."

"Then have her waked, man — go!" Sir Huon blinked, bowed and sped away to return as speedily, whom, at a word, they followed up narrow stair and along vaulted passages into a silken chamber where, roused by the clash and ring of their mail, crept divers bower ladies, to peep large-eyed on such unwonted intruders, until appeared the lady Adelisa, murmuring:

"Come ye, my lords, but my lady bids you be brief, for she would sleep against tomorrow's early rising." So saying, she brought them into a small luxurious

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chamber, a fragrant nest where, upon great bed set within curtained alcove the young Duchess lay amid silken pillows, a lithe voluptuous creature who sighed, moaned and yawned at them behind slim fingers, looking from one grim mailed figure to another, where they knelt waiting for her to speak.

“Well, my lords?” she demanded plaintively. “Is the city aflame? Doth Tristan of Gerance thunder at our gates that ye break thus ungently on my slumbers?”

“Gracious lady,” answered the young Earl, still upon his knees, “we that are thy true lovers and right faithful vassals are here, by reason of our love, to humbly plead Your Ladyship’s Grace will not forth a-hunting tomorrow.”

The Duchess, in the act of yawning again, frowned instead, sat up suddenly, tossed back the two long braids of her lustrous hair and clenched white fist.

“Oh!” cried she. “Is it for this I’m so rudely waked? Not hunt? Saints and angels! Not hunt! Will ye dare wake me to such idle purpose?”

“No, lady!” answered the Seneschal, standing before her small and grim. “To no idle purpose but rather to counsel your Highness ’gainst the folly of adventuring forth of the city whiles there is any least suspicion of peril to your so precious person.”

“Peril?” she repeated scornfully. “And this but mere rumour! Am I then to sit pent within these walls, Sir Richard? Must I make of your fears a shackle to fetter me, my lord Gui? Ha, must I creep and cower like timid, bleating ewe, by reason of your craven doubts, and whispers of lurking treason? Am I so poor, so meek, so mean of spirit? Shame on ye all, and fools to so misjudge the daughter of my valiant father that feared none save God. And so, my lords, except God

stay me — tomorrow I hunt. Now, say what ye will — thou, my lord Gui?" The Earl, still kneeling, fumbled with his sword belt and hung his comely head like one abashed.

"Then you, Sir Richard, you that loved and served my father so valiantly, how say you?"

"That I would the Duke yet lived," sighed Sir Richard, meeting her angry frown with such austerity that she looked askance and, thus beholding silent John, spake him the more angrily:

"And thou by the door there, thou John with thy sullen bodeful visage, thou jingler of phrases and sly ominous slights, hast aught to say?"

"Nought save this, Dame Ippolita, that tomorrow, except God work miracle in thy behalf, the which I doubt, men are like to die for the vain folly of thee — "

"Oh, base wretch!" she gasped. "For this I banish thee. Begone from Pelynt — begone, I say, lest 'stead of dying so worthily, thou lose that scurrilous, knavish tongue; begone, I say! And ye, my lords, see this man is cast forth of the city forthright."

So back went they, and with never a word until, reaching the wide garden lit only by the glimmer of stars now, the young Earl halted suddenly.

"Friend John," said he, "since for thy too bold honesty thou must hence, take thou my horse and furniture, 'tis goodly steed and in saddlebag is store of money . . . and here my hand and with it a friend's good wishes."

"Man John," quoth the Seneschal, clapping him on mailed shoulder, "Pelynt hath good need of thee. Ride to Shallowford Village beyond Saint Wynan's Well to one Nym that is master charcoal burner and trusty fellow beknown to me. Tarry you with him, for ere

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this time tomorrow our lady's humour shall veer and change about, for, though passionate, yet is she ever just and loveth honesty; so shalt mayhap be in favour again."

"My lords," answered John, "I thank ye both right heartily. But what is to be, must be, and methinks I am destined to bide hereabout yet a while. Howbeit, your kindly good will is joy to be well minded. And so, God keep ye both."

Then, with knightly salute, he turned and came speeding where in lower chamber beside the gate the three waited him in close familiar talk with Tomalyn and Simon and certain veterans of the archer guard. These five he beckoned aside and spake them softly, and to such effect that when, after some while, the city gates unclosed, forth towards the dawn rode five horsemen, grim silent figures, and in the hands of each a long ponderous lance. And when they had gone some distance, John spoke:

"Shouldst know the forest country in and about Pelynt, Tomalyn."

"As my hand, John, every glade and path, every ride and thicket."

"Then bring us where we may camp unseen."

CHAPTER XIX

TELLETH OF THESE FIVE. HOW THEY WROUGHT

ROUSING from sleep on his bracken bed, John rubbed his eyes, for the early sun was peeping at him through leaves still gemmed with sparkling dew, while in the woods near and far was merry chirping, such blithe whistling and piping that the pretty babblement well-nigh drowned the rippling music of the little brook that, bright with sun and darkling in shade, ran joyously hard by; and John, who loved all such great and simple joys, lay some while, sensing all this and the abiding wonder of it and glad to be alive. And being so full of vigorous life and the joy of it, he must, *per contra*, begin to think of death, of the dark and hateful path he must tread for sake of those now languishing in the dungeon of Gerance, and of King Tristan's great gallows.

Therefore he sighed deeply and, casting by the cloak had swathed him, sat up chin in fist and surveyed his sleeping companions. Presently he arose and coming silently where Tomalyn slumbered, touched him, whereat Tomalyn groaned; shook him, whereat Tomalyn started up, groping for his dagger.

"Ha, is't thou, John? Saint Cuthbert be praised! I dreamed yon fiendly monster's claws were in me . . . but he's dead, thank the saints and stout Wat!"

"Howbeit, there be greater evils yet alive, Tomalyn. Come now, let us go along beside the brook, lest we rouse our good comrades too soon. See how they do lie so peaceful and, for all their strength, still as dead

men! Well, we may lie dead men every one ere sunset, God wot! Ay, and all by reason of a proud shrew, a curst maid her whimsful folly!”

“How, John?” gasped Tomalyn. “Dost speak thus of our noble lady Duchess?”

“Ay, I do, comrade, I do!”

“Then out on thee, John, for this cometh nigh to blasphemy, since she is truly God’s anointed and Heaven’s very elect. For, John, God hath made her great, setting her high ’bove the poor judgment o’ such as we.”

“Yea — mayhap!” answered John, frowning down into the sparkling brook. “But she, by her wilful pride and unwisdom, undoing God His handiwork, maketh of herself no better thing than merest fool-woman, for she that should think of her people, these teeming thousands of Pelynt, careth for none save herself; this were vile in any woman, yet viler in a duchess — ”

“Hold there!” cried Tomalyn angrily. “Such ill words beseem thee none to utter or me to hear. And moreover, she can be sweetly gentle; why I’ve known her weep right pitiful over maimed cat or cur, ere now — ”

“Yet will peril her life and with it all Pelynt, to kill a deer — ”

“Enough, John! Thou, to speak thus harshly of such noble lady — ”

“Ay!” quoth John. “And yet be ready to die for her, there’s the wonder on ’t.”

Here they paced in silence a while, both very pensive.

“And wherefore,” demanded Tomalyn at last, “why art so sure this hunt shall prove for her so perilous?”

“Nay, I’m nothing sure, man,” answered John patiently, “I do but put myself in Fulk’s skin and try

to think how he would do. Well now, Fulk, knowing of this fool hunt, as beyond doubt he doth, what act shall throw Pelynt into such confusion and wild dismay as to seize her Duchess, and she thus at his brutish will, hold her to ransom? Well, dost see it, Tomalyn? Herself for the Duchy, Pelynt for him and for her shame . . . torment . . . death in shape unspeakable."

Tomalyn frowned and clutched at dagger hilt. John saw his furrowed brow all sudden moist.

"Ay, thy dagger!" nodded John. "Better for her thy dagger this day, or mine, an it must be."

"God and the saints forbend! How . . . what meanest thou, John?"

"Tomalyn, in this forest country, so soon as the quarry be roused, the hunt shall follow amain and every which way; 'tis but natural, as thou knowest; thus shall her company be scattered and then, were I Fulk, then would I leap, smite and away. And so ride we five ever watchful and unseen, as only foresters may, that if Fulk smite indeed, we may burst upon him ere he know."

"Ha, John, thy words do make these scarce-dreamed perils so real I'm all aquake. But my lord Seneschal rides with armed escort attendant and each a chosen man-at-arms."

"And how shall these manage them mid underwoods and thickets? This is work only for men skilled in woodcraft and such are we."

"And yet — but five?"

"Ay, true, but so God aid us, this five shall suffice. Now, comrade, hast ever seen man that lacketh top joint of his little finger?"

"Not I, John."

“Nor heard tell o’ such?”

“Never a word.”

“Then of certain friar, hight Gregorius, whence came he and when?”

“From beyond seas, I’ve heard, and I saw him first some six months ago.”

“So?” mused John. “About the time Hangstone Waste was first made a place of fear! What like is he?”

“A tall man that, despite friar’s habit, beareth himself proud and standeth wide, like lusty man-at-arms. A masterful friar and preacheth well —”

“Hast seen him oft o’ late?”

“Why, he goeth to and fro, none regarding —” But now they heard Walter’s merry voice hailing them; and going back, found a meal prepared and their three companions seated about a fire that made little smoke. So they talked and ate in right good fellowship; but as time passed, sturdy Tomalyn oft sighed and as often glanced with waxing anxiety where rose the sun in growing splendour, while Thurstan, ever a sad man, said little, and John, grave by nature, grew pensive; but Wat was in jovial mood and Walter was full joyous.

“Ha, by Saint Guthlac,” quoth he, “’twill be merest joy to couch lance again in fashion gent and knightly!”

“Verily!” quoth Wat. “And to feel steed leap in ’neath prick o’ spur —”

“Expect he fall,” jibed Walter, “faint, and sink ’neath thy bulkish ponderosity. And lookee, when cracketh lance in smitten foe, here is old Guttler — lo, ye!” And out flashed his sword. “This was my noble father’s blade and hath wrought well i’ the Debatable Land ere now. And is o’ such temper rare it shall shear ye through shield or hauberk sweetly, as they had been

so much cheese — aha, it shall search the inwards of any man that dare it, so do I name it Guttler, for — ”

“Tush!” growled Wat and yawned vastly.

“How now, Beef?” snarled Walter fiercely. “Gape again and — ” Sweet to hear and livery with distance rang the merry notes of a horn, whereat up leapt Tomalyn to tighten belt and lace closer his camail.

“At last!” cried he. “Ho, brothers, yon sounded the Duchess her hunting moot; she is up and away. Come ye.” So rose they forthwith and presently came where their horses stood picketed, swung lightly to high-peaked saddles, and with long lances sloped, rode forth of the little dingle out into the forest, riding silent all and with Tomalyn before, anxious of eye and very grim. He led them by grassy rides and narrow tracks until borne to their ears was a hum that grew to confused sound of laughter and glad voices; and presently, halting to peer through the green, they beheld a noble cavalcade brave with flutter of plume and stir of robe and mantle, in the midst of which glittering company rode the Duchess Ippolita mounted on a sleek, dainty-pacing white Arab, at sight of which spirited animal Tomalyn groaned:

“Lo, yonder, John,” quoth he, “she rideth her fleet Barbary steed that none other may vie with!” John, gloomy-eyed, watched the passage of this noble company, lords and ladies gay with joyous life and eyes bright as the jewels that bedecked them, and thinking what might betide, came near groaning also. Suddenly from the boskages before, rose the shrill warning cries of the huntsmen, the cheery blast of horns, and away sped this great cavalcade in joyous pursuit, scattering as they rode.

“So, the hunt is up!” cried John, turning his horse.

"Come ye, brothers, for this day, how and where Ippolita ride, there ride we."

Plunging through bosky dells where bracken stood high, spurring to swift gallop across broad glades, o'erleaping chattering rills, splashing through shallow streams, bursting furiously through dense underbrush and thorny tangles, rode the grim five, keeping themselves unseen as only cunning foresters might, yet seldom beyond eyeshot of the gracious form that rode her white Arab with such tireless ease. Thus went they until the sun was high, their hardridden horses nearly blown and themselves sweating in their heavy mail.

But on swept the hunt, though wide-scattered now, for game was plentiful, and the hunters taking after some new quarry here and there, until at last of all that great company, John beheld no more than six who galloped foam-spattered horses and, foremost of these, the Duchess Ippolita; but spurring after her rode the young Earl Gui, his long golden hair streaming to the wind, for his jewelled cap was gone, and hard beside him the darkly handsome features of Lord Julian.

"Six!" groaned Tomalyn. "Oh, John, but six to ward her and never a man o' them armed for fight . . . their horses nigh foundered . . . Oh, a sorry six — ah, ayont the rocks yonder . . . steel blinked, John . . . a helmet —"

"Ay, I saw!" said John. "Now steady, brothers all!"

Strong hands reined their horses to an easy amble, while fierce eyes watched expectant as they closed in knee to knee, their animals' plodding hoofs silent on the velvet ling; thus unheard, unseen, they approached

where, overhanging a narrow glade, rose a great crag, jagged and bush-girt and backed by the denser forest. Suddenly this little glade seemed full of horses and armed men, glinting mail and flash of steel.

They saw the Duchess check her Arab in full career, they heard her voice high and clear in imperious challenge, but, even as she spoke, these mailed horsemen, grimly speechless, were all about her; Gui the Earl, urging his jaded horse against them, was ridden down; Lord Julian was dragged from the saddle.

"Brothers," said John, glancing on them right and left, "come ye!"

Down swept their five heavy lances, in went goading spurs, and forth they thundered in such sudden fury of might that nought could abide their shock; stricken horses reared and fell, shivered lance staves were hurled aside; glittering steel whirled and darted in closer, more deadly affray; and high above this furious din rang Walter's fierce laugh and Watkyn's bellowing roar. And now, while John plied sword, shearing edge and darting point, his horse Apollo plied as fiercely with lashing forelegs and snapping teeth until, the press thinning before them, John saw the white Arab a tumbled heap, his glossy coat all flecked with blood and foam. So down to the trampled grass leapt John, sword in fist, and running where lay the Duchess, bore her up and across mailed shoulder and, panting, reeling in his stride, brought her aside from lashing hoof and random sword sweep. On he stumbled until he reached a bubbling rill shady with willow and alder; beside the brook he laid her and stood gazing back, hearkening for sounds of battle, yet hearing no more than squeal of wounded horses and thin wailing of stricken men.

Now presently the Duchess, opening her eyes, gazed

up and around as one sore amazed, and thus beholding John, his face so grim and his bloody sword (and he nowise regarding her), she moaned very piteously, whereat he turned and, looking down on her fierce-eyed, spoke her in voice harsh and bitter:

“Grieve not thy few bruises, Ippolita; there be men yonder dead and dying, by reason o’ thee. Up then, most deadly lady, come, noble Duchess, let us go count thy dead!”

Now, blenching from his look, she turned, hiding her face.

“Begone!” cried she. “Thou’rt hateful to me, — go!”

“Nay,” sighed he, “for though verily I would be quit of thee, I may not yet, lest robbers rob the Duchy of its Duchess. I must bide and ward thee till come thy valiant lords and trusty men-at-arms.” And leaning back to tree, mailed hands crossed on pommel of his sword, he stood viewing her ’neath drawn brows, but seeing how she frowned again and scorned him with her eyes, he spake her yet more bitterly:

“Thou art a malady so virulent I can but hope and pray my good comrades be not all dead of thee, whiles here thou wallowest, High Mightiness, all sprawling arms and legs — ay, hide them for thy shame’s sake, — a poor draggled creature, thy finery o’ raiment mired and torn, thy wonted stateliness all fled, a memory to mock thee . . . and blood, lady, blood smoking yonder on the greensward, and all by reason o’ thy folly. Now here’s just cause to weep — or should one laugh. Some day, mayhap, I’ll make rhyming jingle o’ this and sing how prideful duchess would a-hunting go and was hunted to her woe, with her folly, folly ho — ”

“Dare so, thou John, and shalt be prisoned and whipped!”

"And lo, there spake Gratitude. For lady, oh, most gentle and gracious she, but for thy faithful Tomalyn, three valiant men and my humble self, thou wert now a poor thing for Fulk's abusing or, and better, apt for clammy grave and creeping corruption — "

Leaping to her feet, she struck at him very passionately and smiting his mailed cheek, gasped for pain of it, while he continued:

"Ippolita, God, Whose ways are mysterious, hath given thee life, doubtless to some good purpose, and 'tis thus you do wanton peril this life to no purpose! God hath set in your charge the weal of folk very many; but as I say, the ways of God be far beyond poor finite understanding — "

"Oh, hated wretch!" cried she, cherishing her bruised hand. "To dare so revile me! I'll hear no more. Would I lay dead than owe my life to man so detestable as thyself; the very thought shames me."

"Then content you, lady, for beside this same poor John, thy saviours were four, to wit: thy faithful Tomalyn and my three gentle comrades, Walter de Benyon, Thurstan of Bourne and Vivyan Chand of Ler, called Wat; knights were they on a time and lords in their own right, so, Ippolita, forget John and thinking of these thy noble deliverers and knowing them thus worthy to deliver your ladyship's grace, banish your so ladylike shame — "

Here, ere she might retort on him, a distant voice called on John's name, whereto he made instant answer; and after some while was tramp of plodding hoof and jingle of harness and to them came Tomalyn, a weary man, leading Apollo, this unlovely steed, and on his back, bowed in the saddle, rode Walter, pale, bloody and faint with wounds.

Now, beholding the Duchess, Tomalyn cried her name in voice so loud and joyful that Walter lifted heavy head, got him feebly to earth and sinking upon his knees, spake her gallantly as he might:

“Right noble lady, thy safety is my joy; potent and peerless damozel, thy radiant beauty is my strength! Gracious Duchess, Walter de Benyon now haileth thy loveliness in all humility and — ” the gay voice ended in a painful gasp and pitching forward, he lay aswoon. Then the Duchess Ippolita, forgetting to be stately, was kneeling beside him, had lifted his slim body in her cherishing arms and thus, beholding his riven mail, his handsome young face twisted with agony and streaked with blood, loosed off his dinted headpiece and put back his linked camail to touch and smooth his dark hair.

“Bring me water!” said she. So, while Tomalyn, having filled the battered headpiece with water from the brook, knelt with it that she might tend Walter’s hurts as best she might, John, leaning against the tree near by, looked on wistfully and questioned Tomalyn, low-voiced:

“Now of Wat and Thurstan; live they yet?”

“Ay, John, so far as I do know. I saw them charge together where the enemy broke; then my horse fell with me and I were surely dead but for Walter.”

“And what of the enemy?”

“Seven!” cried Walter, blinking water from his eyes. “Seven, as I live, and all right sweetly dead, and three others in flight, with Thurstan and Watkyn in chase. *Laus Deo, Amen!* Wherefore, most sweet and gentle Duchess, your gracious ladyship should now pour forth your tender gratitude on the wise head of this our John.”

"And wherefore on him, Messire Walter?"

"Lady, but for sapient John, his zealous care of thee, these same rogues were alive and thy most beauteous self their woeful captive."

"Nay, didst not thyself fight for me and valiantly, as these hurts do testify?"

"Ay, verily, sweet Nobility, and to good purpose, yet 'twas at John his bidding; without our John this had never been achieved, ay, fair Graciousness, but for John here, we ne'er should —"

"Oh, come thou," said she pettishly, "come that I may lave thy hurt —"

"Nay, sweet Nobility, there is in thy mere touch such virtue of healing, my strength is renewed; lo, I am well!" And to prove his words, up leapt Walter and staggered and would have fallen but for Tomalyn's ready arm. And then, from no great distance, rose full-lunged, deep-throated roar!

"John — ho, John!" And John answering, was heard presently the jingle of mail, creak of leather, gasping of a horse and forth of screening thickets strode tall Wat, grim with battle but joyous of visage, and after him Thurstan, his bright mail horribly dimmed here and there, astride a jaded steed. Now, beholding these two terrible forms, the Duchess rose and reached them each a hand.

"Welcome, valiant friends!" said she in her kindest voice. "Ippolita of Pelynt greets ye well." Down lighted grim Thurstan and forth strode mighty Wat, to kneel together and each take a hand on mailed fist in knightly reverence. "And now I would have ye speak me your names and what ye are, your rank and condition."

"I," answered Wat, "ere Fitz-Urse ravaged and made waste the Debatable Land, I was Vivyan Chand

of Ler, that was goodly castle once; today I am called Wat."

"And I, noble Lady, am Thurstan, that was once Lord of Bourne and page to the Duke thy noble father."

"Why then, my lord of Bourne, thou art right dearly welcome. Now rise, lordings, and know me grateful," said the Duchess, touching each upon head and shoulder. "For unto ye three, that were strangers all, I owe my life — ay, and that which is more precious. So henceforth ye shall be no strangers but my paladins three and noble knights of my following. Is it understood, Messires?"

"Yea, lady, and nay," answered Wat, shaking his great head. "For we are not three but four, since John is of our brotherhood, ay, and chiefest."

"Brotherhood?" she repeated, knitting dark brows. "How mean ye?"

"We be brethren four, madam," explained Thurstan, "sworn so in evil days on John his sword —"

"And in better day," added Walter, "sworn to thy service, lady, to the death, by this same John."

"John, forsooth!" she exclaimed petulantly. "Now I do think ye prate overmuch of John."

"Howbeit," sighed Thurstan, "John is our sworn brother-in-arms, lady, and so we are four."

"Nay, five," said John, "for Tomalyn is also of our fellowship."

Here the young Duchess viewed the five, each and every, with her slow, bright gaze, eyes very shrewdly keen despite the seeming languour of drooping lashes, and beckoning Tomalyn to spread his cloak for her, sank down thereon and though seated thus lowly, bore herself stately as upon a throne; then turning her back to John, spake his companions very kindly:

"Tell me now, whence come ye, and wherefore hither to Pelynt?"

"Belle dame," answered Wat, "we followed John —"

"Ay, but whence, Messire Vivyan, and to what end?"

"Lady," sighed Thurstan, "from the fair greenwood come we, the kindly green that is haven to all poor distressed folk."

"Even so, noble beauteous dame," quoth Walter, "from the forest country that marcheth with the Debatable Land, the wildwood where be outlaws, rogues and masterless men, wolves'-heads all, a great company driven to the wilderness by cruel harms and bitter wrongs, and therefore a very fierce and lawless company until came our John —"

"Oh!" cried she, frowning. "John again! Forever John!"

"In faith, most gent and gracious damozel!" answered Walter. "For on a day John cometh, riding among us a stranger and solitary, tuning a rote, and sang us songs, and thereafter by art of sword and craft o' wit, brought he order amongst us and good-fellowship. And thus it is that where John goeth thither go we, since John is —"

"Peace, peace!" cried she. "I do grow sick of John, the sight of him, the sound of him."

"In verity, lady, and so do I!" sighed John ruefully. "And by your leave, I will now rid thee of this same John, — would John himself might be so rid of this weariness called John, for —"

A trumpet shrilled afar, answered by blast of horn, while in the woodland all about them was a growing bustle and to-do, a confused clamour of voices, — shouts, cries, the trampling of horses and men-at-arms and foremost of all — Lord Julian of Weare; and all vociferous for joy of their Duchess' safety, and with

proffers of instant service; of vengeance on her assailants and loudest of any — Lord Julian of Weare.

But seated lowly on Tomalyn's cloak, the Duchess Ippolita glanced round about upon them all, deigning them no word; therefore Lord Julian rode nearer and espying John and the four in their battered mail, cried fiercely:

"What ill-beseen fellows are here? Noble lady, gracious Ippolita, would these dare offend thee?"

Then the Duchess rose and fronting this great, and now silent, company, spake them full-voiced:

"Nobles of Pelynt. I that by folly came nigh to death and worse, do stand now before ye hale and well and, perchance, a little wiser, by the valorous devotion of these five men that perilled their lives and bled to my defence. So shall they be knights of my body-guard henceforth. Now let them be mounted! Bring horses." Hereupon, the concourse, pressing closer, shouted in joyous acclaim, whereat Thurstan sighed, Wat yawned and Walter bowed, despite his wound.

"And now, good people all," cried the Duchess, so soon as they were mounted, "let us to Pentavalon and in the Minster give thanks for this my deliverance." So at leisured pace away rode they, a glad company well guarded by archers and men-at-arms; and in their midst on ambling palfrey paced the Duchess Ippolita and behind her the five. Presently beckoning them near, she looked on them, right and left, saying:

"Now, for ye four that are my paladins, my men of might, lo, this John that hath tongue so venomous I was minded to scourge, prison and banish him; instead, I set him in your charge. So, Messires, guard him well nor suffer that he come in speaking distance of me except I so command." Having said the which, she rode on before them again, and the five very silent a while.

CHAPTER XX

TELLETH HOW JOHN MADE A SONG AND WENT TO PRISON

THE sun, being young, was joyous and filled the world and all therein with gladness, waking the birds to merry carolling, blithesome and sweet; spangling the dewy ling with a myriad scintillant jewels, making a quiver of rainbows in high-flung, whispering jets of the great fountain and lighting small red fires in the new-braided tresses of the young Duchess Ippolita who, stepping forth into this fragrant morning, stretched wide her shapely arms and breathed deep, a sigh of rapturous life.

And now it was that she heard it again, a sound very soft and sweet, a strain of melody that, stealing within her dreams, had lured her from slumber to the joy of this new day. She stood a while, dark brows frowning yet ruddy lips faint smiling, as she hearkened to the throb of strings plucked by skilled fingers and thereafter the deep rich tones of a voice singing these words:

“Awake! Awake! the birds sing clear,
The sun is up and John is here;
The sun hath gemmed the world for thee,
The birds make pretty minstrelsy
To woo thee from thy bed, that I
May sing for thee and versify.
So wake, Ippolita, awake
And I a song of thee will make.”

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The singer paused and, soft-footed, the Duchess crossed flower-bordered terrace to peep down at the lean shapeliness of him, despite his worn and shabby garb, as he leaned beside the fountain; and he, quick to espy her, turned his mandora to merrier lilt and therewith the words of his singing, — thus:

“Proud lady, she would hunting ride, —
Now hear this lay of folly!
For fool o’ fools in folly’s pride
A fool will be, whate’er betide;
So fared she to the forest wide —
Ha, what a day o’ folly!

“For forth in prideful pomp she went
Where evils lurking lay,
Base roguery on ravage bent.
But for four men by angels sent,
Methinks her pride by now were shent
And she herself in prison pent
All shamed — ah, woeful day!

“But for four men that thither came,
Alack ’tis sure this prideful dame
Were dead ere now or thing o’ shame.

“Therefore these four we praise; therefore
Hail to ’em every one.
Our lady prideful goes once more,
Nay, prouder showeth than of yore
Unto her faithful John — ”

“Well, thou hated thing, hast done?” she hissed between gnashing white teeth. “Hast done?”

“Nay, High Mightiness,” he answered, bending lowly knee to her. “I might jingle thee in such matter by the hour.”

"'Twas a rant detestable!"

"And yet, noble lady, all true, alas! Save that, for humility's sake, I made of five — four; also I should ha' spoiled the rhyme."

"And wilt dare thus name me 'fool' — wilt dare?"

"Never, potent lady, except in foolish jingle." Now being beyond words (for the moment), she clenched passionate fists at him, she frowned dungeons and death on him and thus swept down the marble stair towards him like a bodeful fury. But now, as he waited to meet her anger, expectant of her passionate invective, she stood dumb, and John was all dismayed to see the flaming anger in her eyes quenched, all at once, by slow-gathering tears, the painful tears of one who seldom wept. Thus because he was amazed and troubled, his ready tongue failed him for once and sinking on his knees before her, he bowed his head and striving for speech, was mute. When at last she spoke, it was in voice no longer arrogant but a murmur soft and broken by sobs:

"Why must thou . . . mock me and forever . . . mock? Why wilt . . . scorn me so bitterly with thy . . . cruel tongue and crueller . . . eyes?"

Now, being so abashed by her tears and moved by the unwonted pleading of this soft sweet voice, John answered, stammering:

"Lady . . . oh, Ippolita, it is but that I . . . I am so faithfully thy servant and . . . well-wisher that I would see thee ever truly worthy of thy best and noblest self. For thou art the Duchess with such marvellous potency for good . . . or ill! Whatso thou doest, — thy lightest word, thy merest look, — these, being seen and noted, have powers far-reaching . . . because thou art indeed the Duchess Ippolita."

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“Alas!” sighed she. “Truly I am but merest woman and would so live.”

“But thy destiny is to rule people amany, to think for them, live and act for them; to be wise and valiant for their sakes, since being so great thou art indeed very servant unto them every one . . . even as I would be . . . to thee . . .” The words ended in a whisper and so was silence. Then she reached forth her hand and touched his bowed head, and John felt that touch go through him like flame of fire.

“My servant!” she repeated. “I mind how once you said ’twas title of honour. Well be it so. Come now, my servant,” said she in lighter tone, “do as I bid thee now; let us forget I am poor sad Ippolita of Pelynt and think on me as the maid Lia, free of care and joyous. Come, let us sit yonder where the sun maketh such glory.” So saying, she brought him to a sunny corner where flowers bloomed and vines clung high against wall and buttress and all shut in by trimmed hedges.

“This is my little pleasaunce where I suffer none save my gentle Adelisa.”

“And where one unseen may see,” said John, his keen gaze sweeping the wide garden.

“Well then, John, do thou talk and make me merry. And forget not that I am Lia and would fain laugh and be glad this little while, though I die tomorrow. Now sit beside me here and let us dream ourselves other and happier folk than we are.”

“Excellent!” quoth John, sitting beside her. “Thou art my very beauteous, wilful daughter and I, thine aged father, an humble though honest swineherd, do now thus counsel thee — ”

“Nay, John,” she laughed, “must show wrinkled,

hoary and with reverend beard, — nay, thou'rt all too young to father me.”

“Then shalt be my sister and I, like loving brother, will — ”

“Hold there! I'll not be thy sister.”

“Alack!” sighed he, “so must you needs remain no more than woeful Ippolita of Pelynt.” And up he rose to bow.

“Oh, then,” cried she pettishly, “as ye will. Speak on — brother.” So down sat John again, saying:

“Lia, sweet my sister, since we have no aged sire with beard to reverence or tongue to counsel us, I in his stead do now, to thy future, welfare admonish thee to think upon wifeness — ”

“Oho!” she murmured, opening wide eyes on him. “But I have, brother John, I have indeed full oft and to such purpose that I will be wife to no man . . . except I love him beyond myself, ay, and all creatures other.”

“Nay, fie, sister, there spake dreaming Virginitie that visions to her love a very demigod and scorneth all mankind therefore. Thus Lia, in my brotherly wisdom, I have chosen fit mate for thee — ”

“Oh, most kindly brother John!” she mocked, with trill of soft laughter. “What like is he?”

“’Tis a comely man and valiant, a right noble man and young, though of such ripe sapience and judgement that he loveth and hath loved thee long and truly.”

“Ah, such paragon!” sighed she, lovely eyes upturned in mock ecstasy. “His name, brother — tell me, a mercy’s sake!”

“He is Gui, Earl of Brandonmere.”

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The Duchess gasped and, flushing with quick anger, turned on John to frown.

“Him?” she exclaimed scornfully. “This is golden Simplicity! Deem you such a fit mate for — me?”

“Ay, truly,” answered John. “I do indeed, for oh, silly child, true greatness is ever simple and in this young lord’s golden pate may lie such latent powers for resolute leadership and wise governance as might teach thee very humility of love and — ”

“Be silent! For now, by my soul, you grow presumptuous!” quoth she, becoming all at once the arrogant young Duchess, whereat (and as suddenly) up leapt John to bow and bow in all meekness.

“Your gracious pardon, High Mightiness,” said he, “methought I spake but to Lia, a sweet maid and lowly, being mine own sister dear — ”

“Oh, sit you, man!” cried she, viewing him with look twixt frown and smile. “Sit, brother John, and tell thy meek sister wherefore thou wouldst mate her with this or — any man?” But instead of obeying, John stood looking down on her with sombre gaze that, beholding all the warm vital beauty of her, strove to read her veriest self.

“My lady Ippolita,” said he gravely, “thou art a duchess and, in a sense, the loneliest maid that ever was. Even thus solitary, and though menaced by many and divers perils, yet must thy woman’s strength bear alone the weal and safety of this great Duchy, a burden for the shoulders of mighty Atlas himself — and — for all thy valiant soul, thou art but a maid and lonely — ”

“Enough, enough!” cried she. “Since for this little hour I am Lia, with never a thought for these cares of

high estate, the creeping threat of Treachery, the chance of sudden death and all the evils that menace this poor Duchess touch not the maid Lia, so let her be gay for a little space. Come, John, prithee make thy sister joyous to laughter now, though tomorrow Ippolita may lie dead. Oh, brother John, make me laugh!"

"Nay," he answered solemnly, "rather would I conjure you, noble lady, to choose one to be thy stay and comfort, a strong man, bold and ready in action, a helpmate wise, honourable and devoted unto thee. And I do think there is no man in all Pelynt more likely and able to all this than Gui, Lord of Brandonmere."

"And, lo, here what passion of eloquence!" she jibed, tugging and twisting a tress of her shining hair in strong, petulant fingers. "Indeed, my lord Gui hath a right wordful advocate! Howbeit, your eloquence availeth him no whit, for I love not this young lord nor ever shall. So, for all his many virtues, wed him I will not!"

"But," said John wistfully, "for the good of the State, Ippolita? And mayhap Love should come . . . later, and . . . crown thee at last."

"And what knowest thou of love, thou Jingling John o' the Green,—what?" she demanded lightly, though keeping her eyes averted from him. But John answering not, she glanced at him and meeting his look, caught her breath and flushed hotly and glanced elsewhere, as also did John; and thus sat they each mute a while.

"Well," sighed she at last, "what know you of this folly called love, my Jingling John,—pronounce!"

"Not I," he answered, frowning on the distance, "for if love indeed be folly, to talk on such were worse folly."

“’Tis said, John, that love is a flaming fire.”

“Why, so it is, Lia, but fire doth purify.”

“Ay, forsooth, you do think that love could, ay, perchance might be a holy thing, John?”

“Ay, I do,” he answered fervently and on impulse; “it were but passion else, that being base, endureth not. Love that is true liveth forever; it giveth all, asking no thing in return; it is content to serve —” here he checked and viewing her askance, sat dumb; while she, viewing his lean, comely face ’neath droop of langorous-seeming lashes, smiled faintly and murmured:

“Alas, oh, my brother, thus might the holy angels love and it is therefore beyond poor me that am merest woman.”

“And I,” quoth he, “am but thy Jingling John.”

“That jingleth not!” she retorted. “So take now thy mandora and sing me a —” John checked her with compelling gesture and, looking whither he directed, she beheld, where the dawn’s mist yet lingered, a flitting shape that, stealing nearer, became a tall, black-habited friar, who paced silently through the early morning, face hidden within his cowl, arms folded in his wide sleeves.

“Well, now,” murmured John, rising, “I am fain to watch yon holy brother at his early, so urgent devotions. Bide you here and stir not!” Then he began to run, his light feet soundless and so quick that almost instantly she had lost sight of him, therefore she watched the silent-pacing friar, this black-shrouded form that suddenly stood motionless, as to glance furtively about and listen, then flitted on and into the oratory. But scarce had he vanished than thither stole John, a crouching sinister shape, to peer into the dim-

ness of that holy place; then he too had vanished into the little chapel.

Now the young Duchess, gazing wide-eyed in strange and ever-growing unease, strained her ears in dreadful expectancy; twice she started to her feet, only to sink down again and wondered to feel herself trembling as the slow minutes dragged.

At last, and suddenly, forth of the chapel lurched John, bowed under the heavy burden of something shapeless and inert. On he came near and nearer, while she watched dumb and motionless; even when he had tumbled his burden at his feet she neither stirred nor spoke, for this same shapeless thing was the black friar gagged and fast bound hand and foot.

So was silence, she gazing horror-struck while John mopped at brow and fetched his breath, gasping.

"Is he — dead? Oh, hast — killed him?" she demanded at last, whispering.

"Nay, faith, I but rapped him . . . soundly asleep with my . . . dagger hilt," answered breathless John.

"Oh . . . sacrilege!" cried she, clasping tremulous hands. "This is a reverend friar, a holy man, a son of Holy Church."

"Why, so he seemeth," answered John, stooping above his senseless captive, "yet for his holiness it is questionable, for — lo, here 'neath his habit is link mail! And here again, — this cowl hideth shock head that lacketh friarly tonsure, — look now! Dost know the face of him?"

"No!" she answered, bending to see the face John's hand was revealing. "But tell me —"

"That will I, sister, when I've hid him." And speaking, John seized and dragged the unconscious man away behind a deep buttress of the wall where vines

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clambered and bushes grew thick; then back came he, to find the Duchess viewing him with such eyes that he remained standing to gaze on her like one in marvellous perplexity.

"Prithee now," he questioned, shaking his head, "art thou my lady Duchess or the maid Lia?"

"Oh, speak, man!" she cried. "And speak plain."

"Forthright, noble lady," said he, bowing; "yon seeming friar being come into the oratory, kneels him before the altar, but 'stead of expected prayers, chalks him a little cross hard to see except by eye expectant, and above this mark, in chink of the altar, thrusts a parchment. Well, lady, then leapt I and rapped him to slumber and so bore him hither."

"Ay, but — this parchment?" she demanded eagerly.

"I left it hid, lady, that we, being hidden, may see who cometh to seek and find —"

"Didst not read it, man?"

"Lady, it was writ in clerkly Latin —"

Up leapt the Duchess and was away or ever he might stay her, therefore John strode after her. Reaching the little chapel, bright now with the young sun's level beams, they came to the high altar with its ever-burning lamp and directed by John's finger, the Duchess found the small chalked cross, and from a fissure above this in the time-worn masonry, drew a folded parchment. Opening this with steady fingers she read it once and twice, then glanced at John with eyes bright and fierce beneath brows suddenly knit.

"Canst read Latinity, John?" she demanded.

"Verily, lady."

"Then dost know this for threat against thy life?"

"Ay, somewhat —"

"Somewhat!" she repeated impatiently, "It is mani-

fest and yet saith that I understand not — 'tis thus I construe it:

"The man John hight is danger to be removed. At the new moon nine days hence by midnight look ye for the constellation of Ursa Major. Then shall fall the Lion. Let bars avail not that the Needle's Eye show clear, and fire flame that confusion may be confounded."

"What of it, John," she demanded; "how sayst thou?"

"That the sooner 'tis hid again where we found it the better, for we —"

"Nay, by God's good light, here is manifest treason! This shall to my secret council this very hour —" But even as she turned, to her amaze and speechless anger, the parchment was twitched from her fingers, folded and slipped back into its hiding place all in a moment.

"Come, let us go," said John, glancing away through the open doorway. "Come, I say, lest we are seen —"

"Render me that script!" she cried imperiously. "Obey me or as God's my help —"

But as she spoke his powerful arms seized, whirled her up; then they were crouching together behind the high altar.

"Be silent!" he whispered. "One comes — !"

Strange, quick patter of feet, a beastlike snuffling and into the oratory gambolled that small, misshapen creature called Nidge. The dwarf cut a caper, peeped back into the sunny garden, then running to the altar, peered muttering, as his fumbling hands quested here and there; anon he chuckled hoarsely and from its

hiding place drew the folded parchment; even as he did so, the Duchess cried his name and as he turned, showing a face that seemed all goggling eyes and gaping mouth, John's quick hand reached, caught him and raised him aloft, kicking and struggling.

"Ha, rogue mannikin," quoth he, shaking the little creature in fierce gripe, "whither wouldst bear this writing? Speak, or by the saints, I'll make ye dog's meat!" The dwarf squeaked, clawing and striving with strength so unexpected that to aid John's right hand, came his left.

"Oho, traitor!" squealed Nidge. "Aha — spy! Oh, Mistress . . . this John would give thee . . . shame . . . death. Ha, let him not . . . slay me that loveth thee . . . ha, Mistress —"

"Loose him," cried the Duchess. "'Tis but sorry halfwit, a poor simple thing —"

"Speak, rogueling!" cried John between shut teeth; "to whom would ye bear this parchment?" But instead of answer, the dwarf plucked forth a short dagger and drave it into John's side so strongly that the stout blade snapped against his hidden mail and, gasping to the blow, John reeled, his sinewy fingers relaxed, and the dwarf, kicking free, rolled aside, bounded to his short legs and was out of the chapel and away. But leaping in pursuit, John set fingers to lip, whistling a soft, birdlike note twice repeated. . . . Down from the air above them something whirred and smote. . . . The dwarf threw up both his arms, bounded, squeaked, and tumbled asprawl, transfixed upon a long arrow.

The Duchess uttered a muffled cry; then, looking where John looked, beheld the flash of a headpiece on the wall above and beneath it the comely face of Walter, who leaned down to smile engagingly, flourish bow

in graceful salutation and kiss his hand gallantly ere he vanished again.

"Oh . . . murder!" gasped the Duchess. "My little Nidge is murdered . . . and by your order —"

"Call you this murder, lady?" said John, gesturing towards that which lay so very silent and still. "This parchment was writ by traitor hand for traitor eye to read and this poor small rogue was traitorous go-between. Yon arrow, taking this one life, hath saved a many, I dare to think, ay, and perchance thy Duchy. Nay, hear me! This thy so cherished imp was verily a spy on thee. 'Twas he that, hid 'neath the fountain, heard Tomalyn speak you how he would that night to Hangstone Waste . . . and so came Tomalyn very nigh to death. It was this same small rogue-hand, I guess, set flame to your chamber, whereby you also came very nigh to death. And now, well, — he was speeding to warn hidden Treachery, so it might lurk still hidden and all unknown. Ippolita, if this indeed be murder and murder be ever justified, then methinks this was most surely. Howbeit, thus have I done and thou art the Duchess to judge me how you will. Meanwhile . . . this must vanish."

Then John stooped and, with a certain gentleness, took up this small thing and bearing it back into the chapel, laid it reverently out of sight behind the altar. This done, he turned and found the Duchess had followed.

"Now — what?" she questioned.

"This parchment!" he answered. "Whoso expected this, sent Nidge therefor but, Nidge not returning, it is possible that whoso wants may himself come a-seeking. So shall those traitors be manifest and one of these dead."

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"Why then," sighed she, "let us go watch."

"That will I!" he nodded. "But for thyself, — the day is yet very young, get thee back to bed, or thy stitchery, or —"

"Ha, now, will ye dare to order my goings and doings?" she demanded wrathfully.

"Not I, *par dex*, I were not so desperate bold or hardy!"

"Yet dare to bid me hence! And wherefore?"

"Methought those eyes were better closed in slumber than gazing on what may betide here —"

"Mean you death?"

"Ay, belike."

"And what then? These arms have wielded sword and lance ere now, these eyes have seen death in many shapes mid fury of battle —"

"And — on the jibbet, gentle lady. And thus it is to be a duchess, — and such an one."

"Wilt dare jibe and mock me yet?"

"Nay, I do but think those eyes, — and such eyes, — were made to look on fairer things, those arms to cling to thy chosen man or cherish thy babe —"

"Gra' mercy to heaven, I have no such to plague me."

"Yet patience, lady, and these shall achieve soon or late, for —"

"And so be dumb — thou!" she cried furiously. So they went in silence until they had reached again that little bowery garden; but being there, she turned about and beckoning him to follow, led the way to a narrow stair that mounted to the battlements. "We shall watch better from the wall," said she, frowning, "and moreover, I would speak with this man Walter de Benyon that slayeth so lightly to your will. Up thou!"

Silently John followed, a pensive man yet very heedful of these slim, arching feet and slender ankles, the which mounting before him, bore her with such assured ease. Reaching the embattled walk that crowned the wall between mighty flanking towers, the Duchess came to sudden halt, as did John also, for seated cross-legged upon the stones, opposite each other, Walter and tall Wat were rolling dice upon the broad, mailed back of a dead man.

"Aha!" laughed Walter. "Seven I set! Come, better that, my good shog, and this rogue knight his harness is to thee —" Then the Duchess swept down upon them and they, upstarting to their knees, bowed armed heads to the pale majesty of her.

"Ah — what is here?" she demanded, pointing down at this prone figure. "Why this . . . this is Sir Ranulf, that is my warden of the Wrykyn Tower yonder."

"Nay, fair ladyship," answered Walter, "by your grace, this was Ranulf that seeing yon friar creeping below and John upon his heels, would ha' cried a warning to aforesaid roguish friar, and when Watkyn seized his traitor's throat, bidding him to silence, he would ha' shouted —"

"So is he dead!" quoth Wat.

"Thus," added Walter, "your sweet grace shall perceive this same rogue knight died of a shout —"

"Lady," said Wat, "as saith Walter, here died false rogue."

"But this," said the Duchess faintly, leaning against the battlement as if suddenly weak, "this was — Ranulf! Oh, then . . . alas, if he be faithless . . . whom shall I trust?"

"Noble lady," said Walter, rising, "here first is

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John and second — myself, with three I will swear by — to wit, this Wat — ”

“Wagtongue, hold!” growled Wat. “I speak for myself. Lady of Pelynt, thine is Vivyan Chand of Ler in life and death.”

“Ha, verily!” cried Walter. “Though all the world prove false, we be five thou mayst trust ever — ”

“And wherefore?” cried she bitterly. “Wherefore should I trust ye that deal so lightly in death, ye that be strangers all?”

“This is for thy judgment!” answered John, his watchful gaze ever upon the garden below. “And ’tis mere fool that knoweth not friend from foe.”

“And how, ah, sweet heaven, — how may I know this Ranulf was not slain by ye to base purpose — ”

“Lady, oh, lady,” quoth Walter reproachfully, “thy doubt striketh at the very roots of our knightly honour; we are shrewdly smit thereby and mortified — ”

“And Ranulf,” she retorted, “Ranulf lieth dead of ye.”

“In sooth!” nodded Wat gloomily. “And in yon corner yet another.”

“Sancta Maria!” she whispered. “Another?”

“Indeed, lady!” sighed Walter, dolefully as he might. “’Twas knavish archer would have loosed shaft at our John, wherefore needs must I smite said archer lest he slay John. Now, gracious lady, if in your noble heart be any least doubt of us, thy most faithful lieges, or for our acts blame, the which methinks cannot be, then have us to prison; let us, that do so love thee and in especial John, be in deepest dungeon pent, or — ”

“Now as God seeth me, this will I!” cried she fiercely

and so turned and speeding lightly down the narrow stair, was gone, while Walter, leaping afoot, stared after her in wide-eyed dismay.

"Soho!" growled Wat. "Now see how thy cursed babble hath wrought, wi' thy clack o' prison and dungeon! A murrain on that chattersome tongue o' thee."

"Well, now," sighed Walter, "we are not dungeoned yet and she is woman, and woman is ever contradiction beauteously personified; thus though she prison us today, she shall honour us tomorrow. How sayst thou, John?"

"Well and good!" he answered, watchful gaze still bent below. "For since the Duchess singled us out to all and sundry, proclaiming ye her paladins, we are become the very butts for crouching Roguery, marks for secret Treachery to aim at. Death waiteth us at every turn save in a dungeon; there may we be a while secure — mayhap."

"Ho, but John man," growled Wat. "Death ere now hath jostled us full oft and we none the worse —"

"Lo, yonder they come to take us!" said Walter, clapping hand to sword. "Ten lusty pikemen — ho, John, do we withstand 'em, shall us rage among 'em lionlike?"

"Nay, we submit most lamblike. Come ye."

Thus presently surrounded by bristling pikes they went whither they were led.

CHAPTER XXI

TELLETH OF DIVERS SIGNS AND PORTENTS

CHIN on fist stood John, gazing pensive through a narrow loophole that pierced the massive wall, his brows close knit, his gentle mouth grimly set and all unheeding his companions, who, still busied with the dice, snarled at and squabbled with each other as was their wont, until Walter, having won of growling Wat all he had to lose, yawned, pouched the dice and becoming aware of the silent figure at the loophole, spake forthwith, kindly reproachful:

“Certes, John, for all thy nimble wit, thou’rt lumpish laggard any wooer should despair on save myself, that wooeth for thee in despite o’ thee.”

“How so, Walter?”

“By bold statement of fact, subtle inference and glowing metaphor. It was but yester morn our lady sendeth for me to gracious question me as to this scratch I took in her behalf . . . And what did I — ”

“Talked!” growled Wat.

“Ay, I did, — and of thee, John, thy wit and worth, thy transcending valour, thy subtle wisdom, thy flaming manhood, thy rare — ”

“And the duck,” growled Wat, “the duck sayeth ‘quack’!”

“And thou, like sorry ass, brayeth and so be dumb! . . . But alack, John, though I paint thee, to her imagining, strong as Hercules, wise as Solon and lovely as Hyperion, how shall I win her love to thee that in this very hour did look on the beauteous creature so harshly and therewith named her — fool — ”

Answered John, soft-voiced and gazing forth of the loophole again.

"Hark now, Walter, and know this once for all. 'Stead of such kindness, I had rather win this proud lady's bitter scorn and fiercest hate."

"Holy Saint Guthlac!" exclaimed Walter. "Good lack, what maggot bites thee, comrade?"

Now ere John might answer was creak of bolts, the door swung open and to them strode tall Swayne, second in command of the archer guard.

"Good sirs," quoth he, shaking armed head at them, "I am to bring ye afore the Duchess, her council. Come then and the saints be with ye." Down winding stair he led them and through lofty, echoing hall to an inner chamber close guarded, where sat the Duchess in smiling converse with Lord Julian of Weare; near by sat the young Earl of Brandonmere, who, being not yet recovered of his hurts, showed gloomy and dejected, while somewhat apart stood Sir Richard the Seneschal, talking low-voiced with two counsellors who, like himself, were grey of head and grim of aspect.

"Lo, sirs!" said the Duchess, scarce heeding the three. "These be them ye wit of. My Lord Julian, do you now question them."

My lord smiled on the Duchess, scowled at the three, tossed back his perfumed hair and spoke:

"Ye men that come none knoweth whence or to what ill purpose, ye do stand indicted for the cruel slaying of three men, loyal subjects of our lady, to wit —"

"Nay, sir," said John meekly, "first, by her gracious leave, I would know of her ladyship where now is he that with the dawn came stealing in guise of black friar?"

"He lieth fast 'prisoned!" answered Sir Richard.

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"Now ye," quoth Lord Julian, with arrogant gesture, "what of these ye so basely slew, namely —"

"Sirs," quoth John, clear-voiced, "the first was Nidge the dwarf and right treacherous spy and the gift, as I hear, of thyself, my lord Julian! As for other two, let these my good comrades tell."

"Lords," growled Wat, "the man I slew would ha' cried warning to yon same traitor that crept in friar's habit dight."

"And Messires," said Walter, "I but smote rogue archer who would ha' feathered murderous arrow in this John that loveth and but liveth for her ladyship's sweet grace — and moreover —"

"And all o' this," added John something hastily, "was by reason of certain treasonous message hid by this seeming friar in the oratory; my lords, behold it! I pray one of ye will read it forth."

"This will I!" said the Duchess.

Drawing the screed from his gypsire, John unfolded and laid it before her; now watching her, John saw how keenly alert were the eyes that 'neath the slumberous droop of their long dark lashes viewed her auditory, each intent face, as soft-voiced she spoke:

"My lords, this is writ right fair, in clerkly Latin, and this its sense — or no sense. Hear now and judge ye:

"The man, John hight, is danger to be removed. At the new moon nine days hence by midnight, look ye for the constellation of Ursa Major. Then shall fall the Lion. Let bars avail not that the Needle's Eye show clear and fire flame that confusion be confounded."

"Well my lords," she questioned, "what make ye of this riddle?"

Now some were who laughed, others frowned or were grave, but all began to speak and loudest of any, lord Julian of Weare.

"A jape!" laughed he. "A fool's jest for mischief's sake! A farrago of folly, this talk of moons and stars and lions."

"Why, so think I!" nodded the Duchess, knitting her slim brows. "And yet — this mention of John as danger to be removed, how sayst of this, Julian?"

"That 'twas writ by himself. Ho, thou John, confess now this is thine own handiwork to win thee notice."

"Not so!" cried Sir Richard, starting afoot. "Here is no fool's jest writ to such fool purpose. Hid within these cunning phrases I see that doth menace us each and every, and this our Duchy of Pelynt. 'Then shall fall the Lion!' D' ye mark this, my Lord of Brandonmere?"

"Ha, that do I, thanks to John!" answered the Earl. "Speak now, Sir Richard, that all may know and knowing, act forthright."

"Gracious lady and good my lords," said the Seneschal, his single eye very fierce and bright. "Hangstone Waste hath long been accounted place of fear where none dared venture day or night, an evil place where death smote in beastly fashion. Howbeit, of late this John and his bold fellows watched there, they smote and slew the slayer, they found also that our enemies, having thus made Hangstone Waste a dreadful desolation, have, thus secure, unseen and all unsuspect, wrought amain and mined that tower we call 'The Lion' —"

At this was clamour with an ever-growing dismay; and John noticed that two only were silent, Lord Julian who nibbled at a finger and glanced from one troubled

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face to the other, and the Duchess, whose langorous-seeming eyes watched Lord Julian.

“My lords,” said she suddenly, in her clear ringing tones, “I cry ye silence for this John that, since he uncovered this dire menace, he may speak. Come, John, that art so beyond thy vaunting, speechful nature dumb, take now this screed and show us the inner sense and true meaning on it.”

“As you will, lady,” he answered, and looking on the script, construed it thus, word for word. “At midnight, nine days hence, look ye for the constellation of Ursa Major, — that is to say Ursus the Bear, which can but mean Fulk Fitz-Urse. ‘Let bars avail not that the Needle’s Eye show clear.’ Gracious lady and good my lords, as ye may all know, in cities of the Orient, the small gate for foot passengers is ever called ‘The Needle’s Eye’, so by this I judge is meant: ‘Let the postern be unbarred!’ And lastly: ‘Let fire flame that confusion may be confounded.’ This I take to mean: ‘When hath fallen the mighty Lion Tower and its dreadful thunder waked the townfolk in sudden terror, then set fire to such houses as ye may, that fear shall wax to panic and this goodly city lie helpless for pillage and ravishment. Ha, potent lady, ye valiant lords,” cried John, harsh-voiced and with sudden passionate gesture, “what night should this be for your wives and children! Now bethink ye — since houses cannot flame nor gates unbar of themselves, ye may argue that here, even within your mighty defences, hands are ready to so do. Treachery waits to let in upon ye havoc and destruction!”

Now when he had thus spoken, for a moment was an awful silence, then up sprang Lord Julian to flash out his sword:

"Ippolita," he cried, "bid the city bells ring out instant alarm! Let sound your trumpets! Marshal your powers, let us out and smite —"

"Ha, my lord," cried John, "whither should we haste, and being there — whom should we smite? This were to play the game as Fitz-Urse would have us —"

"Yea, verily!" nodded Sir Richard.

"Yet must we do somewhat!" said the Earl.

"Why, truly," nodded John. "We can watch and — wait!"

"Wait, quotha!" cried Lord Julian scornfully. "And for what?"

"Midnight, my lord, nine days hence," answered John. "For then shall Fitz-Urse be lying in Hangstone Waste, he and all his array. And then, sirs — well, 'stead of the Lion falling, we shall assail him right suddenly, van and flanks and rear. So, I pray, shall be an end of Fitz-Urse ere the dawn, and all the evil of him. Meantime, my masters all, I would humbly suggest —" But here he paused to sudden knocking on the door, and to them entered Oswin, the stately Lord Chamberlain who, with many obeisances:

"Right excellent noble lady and good my lords," saith he, "hither is come Sir Philip Wynton, lord Seneschal of Sherbourne and the March, wooing instant speech of ye."

"Bid him hither!"

A slow, heavy tread, a jingle of mail and upon the threshold stood a tall man of commanding presence and completely armed; beneath shining bascnet and framed in mail coif his face showed ruddy and bold of feature, lit by eyes very bright and deep-set that seemed to flicker as they quested swiftly to and fro; they glanced at this man and that, they lingered

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awhile on Lord Julian (or so thought watchful John), they blinked upon the warm beauty of the young Duchess and abased themselves as she spoke:

“What now, Sir Philip of Sherbourne?”

“Alas and alas!” quoth he, full-throated, and striding forward, he thudded before her on his knees and smote his great mailed chest with mailed hand. “Noble liege lady . . . my good lords, I bring ye dread news, such as this tongue may scarce utter. Ippolita . . . oh, Ippolita, woe is me!” Here once again mailed fist smote mailed chest resoundingly, inasmuch that the chain mitten slipped and hung dangling on its thongs. . . . Then John’s eyes narrowed, his lips curled in slow, grim smile, for this great, sinewy hand lacked the tip of its little finger.

CHAPTER XXII

TELLETH OF SIR PHILIP WYNTON, HIS HAND

SAID the Duchess, her long eyes seeming again slumberous and languid, "We pray you now temper your so grievous woe, Messire Philip, and speak us thy news."

"Then in a word, gent lady, ah, bitter dole — Fitz-Urse hath stormed and destroyed thy strong castle of Sherbourne. Long defence made we but 'twas night and he sudden, so — alas . . . thy castle is no more, thy people all slain, save only myself and sorry three —"

"And thyself, valiant sir, all unharmed!" murmured John.

"Ah!" sighed the Duchess gently. "Not so much as a scratch, Sir Philip."

"Lady," he answered, glaring at John and bowing to her, "mine armour is proof and fortune was kind —"

"Kind?" she murmured. "Why, 'twould seem so and yet . . . I wonder! Who knoweth —?"

"Valiant Duchess," cried he, leaping afoot. "Think now on vengeance! Ye noble lords, let us up and do. For, though weary with fight and heavy with grief, hither rode I amain to summon ye forth 'gainst this accursed Fitz-Urse for, beside Sherbourne, he hath harried all the March, wasted and burned your village of Swanscombe. Ah, dread lady, thy poor folk all dead or scattered! Thus here stand I, suing thee to war! Knowing thy valiant spirit, I beseech thee up and lead us! Summon all thy powers and lead us forth to smite and avenge these cruel harms." Now scarce had Sir Philip's passionate outburst ended than John laughed, so sudden and loud that all eyes turned on him in

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angry amazement, whereat he laughed but the louder.

"Oho, a fox!" he cried. "A fox — hark ee all, now!" And forthwith lifting rich, sweet voice he began to intone or chant thus:

"A fox there was that lost his tail
But, 'stead of making dismal wail,
He, tailless thus, would have it so
That foxes all should tailless go —

"And now, this knight that Mars-like, thundereth for sudden war, this valorous knight having lost his castle, his men and all save his life, would make losing the fashion and have ye losers all, — your Duchy, your goods, your very lives — for this man serveth Fulk — "

"Ha, lewd cur!" roared Sir Philip and leapt with vengeful fist, but stooping under the wild blow, John closed with him, and twisted in fierce, cunning wrestler's grip, Sir Philip clashed heavily to the stone floor.

"Treason!" cried Lord Julian and sprang with sword aglitter, but the thrust was parried and the weapon wrested from him by Wat's resistless hand. "Ho, guards!" cried Lord Julian, but Walter's instant fingers silenced him. Then was sudden uproar, quelled suddenly by the Duchess's clear voice and imperious commands.

"He lies!" gasped Sir Philip, coming to his feet, dagger in hand. "Here's death to foul traitor!"

"Yea, verily!" said the young Duchess, her long eyes fierce and wide. "Here shall be death for all traitors, but they shall hang aloft on the Wrykyn Tower. So put up your steel, Sir Philip."

"But how of yon base liar — ?"

"Sir Philip, it is now for us to prove him verily traitor and liar and this hour shall be his last." Then she looked on John and in this moment her eyes showed

perplexed and greatly troubled, the eyes of a woeful maid, then down-sweeping lashes veiled them, she bowed her head; but when she spoke it was with the coldly imperious voice of a woman stern and resolute.

"Thou, John of the Green, hast declared this knight of Sherbourne traitor; prove now thy words or it shall be the worse for thee. Have done with thy jingling and speak forthright." So John turned to Wat, who towered behind him.

"My lord Vivyan," quoth he, "show now unto the Duchess Ippolita and her council this knight's left hand —" Now scarce were the words uttered than Sir Philip, dagger in hand, leapt for the door; but mighty Watkyn had leapt also, the murderous dagger thrust was parried and Sir Philip, smitten amain by terrible fist, would have fallen inert, but a long arm stayed him, hove him aloft and bearing him to the Duchess's footstool, there laid him. Then lifting the unconscious man's left hand, quoth Wat:

"Lo, see ye now and be assured!"

"And how," cried my lord Julian, "how shall this assure us; what proof of treachery is here?"

"Sir Walter de Benyon," said John, "pray you tell how and where you first saw this hand."

"Ippolita, right beauteous Nobility," sighed Walter, "and ye gentle lords, be pleased to know ye that hither riding to your fair Duchy, I and my good comrades were beset by Roguery on the forest road. The debate waxed sharp, yet in the end Right o'er Might prevailed and we drave them headlong. Yet we followed amain and I came to grips with one, a tall man completely armed. Now the moon was bright above us and as we strove I saw this man's hand lacked for tip of little finger. Noble lady, this man brake from me, and I, wild clutching as he fled, reft from girdle his pouch or

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gypsire, and found therein the parchment ye wot of, whereon is drawn the plan of this your citadel and inner defences. And by this hand so strangely marred, by his stature, port and mien, I do avow and pronounce this man was Sir Philip Wynton and none other."

The young Duchess stared down on this betraying hand for a long moment, wherein it seemed none stirred or breathed, then down swept slumberous lashes and she spoke between shut teeth, yet John saw she shivered.

"Let him be taken hence . . . to the Wrykyn — there at sunset tomorrow shall he be hanged. Sir Richard, my lords — how say ye?"

"So may all traitors die!" quoth Sir Richard. And now by his order came archers of the guard and amid a hoarse and vengeful murmuring, Sir Philip Wynton was borne away like a man already dead. And now spake Lord Julian, his eyes aglow in face grown strangely pale (or so thought John).

"Ippolita, what now of Fitz-Urse? Shall he thus defy thee and all unchallenged? Shall he burn and ravage where and how he will and our swords be idle? To cower thus within these walls were very shame! Ha, let us out and smite our foes suddenly — this very night!"

"Why, Julian!" she sighed. "Ah, Julian, it was thus yon traitor Wynton counselled me. Howbeit, first will I smite our foes within. Therefore, Julian, go thou, with Simon and his archers, and take me the Lord of Hartsmead, together with Sir Raynald Valence, and see them also prisoned in the Wrykyn."

Lord Julian's bold, bright eyes opened wide and for a moment he stared quite dumb-struck.

"Well, my lord?" she questioned gently, and once again her long eyes showed slumberous while her ruddy lips curved to strange, slow smile.

"But," said he stammering, his wonted assurance

quite gone, "but Ippolita, lady . . . noble lady, of your grace, how . . . I pray you how have these lords offended?"

"This shall be known!" she murmured. "Go thou!" Recoiling before the dreadful smile of these vivid lips, he turned and slowly, as one in a dream, crossed to and opened the door and thus beheld grim old Simon with file of archers. For a moment Lord Julian hesitated, then went forth and the door closed behind him.

"Lady," questioned the Seneschal in troubled voice, "what meaneth this?"

"That I have eyes and ears!" she answered fiercely. "And these do warn me of pitfalls that gape on me whereso I turn, — treasons and rebellions! Ah, this was not so in my father's day, for that he was a man and they had not dared. But I . . . oh, this curse of Womanhood! Yet can I be fearless as a man, as resolute, ay — and as merciless —"

"Now God forbend!" quoth John. "For he that hath no mercy is mere craven, since cruelty is bred of fear."

"Ha — thou!" she cried bitterly. "Wilt thou deem me craven?"

"Never, except thou prove merciless indeed." Now at this, being speechless with anger, she could but turn to scowl on the speaker, while Sir Richard smiled behind lean hand, winking his one eye upon the veteran knights who sat beside him, his two old comrades. So for a long moment the Duchess frowned on John, staring into his serene and gentle eyes; then John felt his heart leap and was gazing at the flagstone underfoot, though seeing it not, and she, breath suddenly checked, was staring as blindly at the hands in her lap that, clasping each other, yet trembled. And thus for each of them, all sudden and unexpected, was born

the certain knowledge of that which was never to die or be forgotten. But now, stealing a glance at troubled John, she sensed his awareness and clenched her hands and turned her back on him, saying:

“And now, my lords, as for our foes without . . . if it be true that Fitz-Urse hath struck us at Sherbourne, then shall he expect us there and, so expectant, be ready; wherefore to assail him thereabouts were folly, as I think. Then, of this deadly menace in Hangstone Waste, is it watched?”

“Certes, lady,” answered Sir Richard. “’Tis watched full privily day and night by Tomalyn and his foresters, whiles there, all unsuspecting, our foes do mine the Lion, and thither in nine days shall creep Fitz-Urse, lured thus to his destruction.”

“Ay, but . . . in nine days!” she repeated ’twixt shut teeth. “In such time what innocent blood may spill, what shameful harms be wrought! And this shall not be, though I die for it.” Sighing deeply, she looked from the golden-haired young Earl of Brandonmere to the three grizzled veterans very wistfully.

“So thus,” said she, “thus is my council of ten become but four . . . ye only dare I trust. Ye, Sir Mortimer Travis and Sir Giles Shere, and thyself, my good Sir Richard, because I have known ye all my days and moreover ye were my noble father’s chosen comrades in arms; and thou my Lord of Brandonmere, because thou art — Gui. Now ye being men and right skilled in craft of war, think how we may hold Fitz-Urse from all chance of evil these nine days. . . . But now, for these three men, bid them begone.” And so, at gesture of Sir Richard, John and his two companions made their obeisance and went out from this chamber of council.

CHAPTER XXIII

TELLETH SOMEWHAT OF ONE GREGORIUS, A BLACK FRIAR

“AND lo, ye,” quoth Walter, as they paced together all three in the sunshine, “never so much as word o’ thanks for our John or look for us — ”

“Well, she’s a woman,” growled Wat; “and woman’s a bane!”

“And thou a numps!” retorted Walter. “For woman is man’s life, joy, comfort and consolation, and yon Ippolita was made and formed for joy, and I do thus — ”

“Buzz!” snarled Wat. “Buzz goeth fly!”

“Ha, thou Nitwit!” cried Walter. “Hark now to De Benyon and grow less o’ fool: Imprimis she flouteth us and yet, *nota bene*, she is a woman and therefore — contrary! Ergo, she flouteth because, *per contra*, she loveth. And whom did she most flout? John! Whom then doth she most love? John! Thus let John play the man and, schooled by me, he shall achieve and thus our fortunes march — ”

“Ha!” quoth Wat. “Yonder march they shall march us back to prison haply!” And he nodded where strode Swayne with archers and pages attendant.

“Noble sirs,” said Swayne, saluting them, “henceforth ye are quartered here in the citadel nigh our Duchess. These gent pages shall show ye. For thyself, my lord John, her grace bids thee to her and presently.”

“Aha!” whispered Walter. “Oho, man John, when art lord of her and this fair Duchy, forget not thy

Walter!" John frowned, laughed, sighed and went his way as in deep of troublous thought, yet with senses on the alert, for, hearing quick feet behind him, he swung about, dagger in hand, then sheathed it as suddenly and reached forth both hands in welcome to Thurstan, him dusty and rusty with travel and hard faring, yet whose sad face smiled greeting as they embraced.

"Cometh he at last, comrade?"

"Yea, brother, I followed him unseen from Beckford i' the South, where I heard him preach craftily seditious, how that God had ordained man should rule and therefore no country might long prosper 'neath sway of woman — and the like. And, soothly for to say, everywhere is for him glad welcome and acclaim, even as here."

"And where now is he?"

"Sitting yonder in the gatehouse with Simon and divers other gent persons, and mighty full o' question touching the sudden prisonment of certain lords, and certes all the town is agog and eager for to hear on't."

"And, Thurstan, small wonder! As for this Friar, watch him yet; nay — bid Walter, and do thou rest a while, for we are like to ride abroad this night, so get thee to our brethren and bid them be yare and ready. Much have I to tell thee and hear anon but now must I to the Duchess."

He found her couched amid pillows in murmurous converse with the gentle Adelisa; and now she viewed him from the corners of her long eyes, saying in voice langorous yet mocking:

"Lo, my Adelisa, this grimly John! This is he that singeth jinglesome brags, a vaunting fellow that boasteth himself Pelynt's salvation. And by all the

saints he shall prove his vaunt or suffer pain for it. Draw near, thou John, nor show thus sullen, for hast so wrought that my lord Seneschal and Earl Gui would have thee sit with them henceforth one of my council. Well, John?"

"Lady, I am honoured — but — "

"Moreover, they desire me to bestow rewards for service. So now how shall I requite thee and thy valiant bretheren? For thyself . . . what guerdon dost ask of me?"

"A command, lady, small or great."

"To what purpose?"

"Give me men, few or many, for to search out Fitz-Urse his posture and array, or harry him with constant threat of sudden onfall."

"Now this is well bethought. Yea, we will speak on this anon, but now what wouldst have of me? Money, a gift of land, honour of knighthood?"

"Grand merci, but none of these."

"And wherefore not, Sir Arrogant Humility?"

"Whiles I tarry in thy Duchy, I had liefer be Jingling John."

"And make me still thy debtor? Well, so be it. But how long will Jingling John deign to honour my poor Duchy with himself?"

"Till the cares that do irk thee be done away."

"Ha, certes," she mocked, "thou art first to save my Duchy and myself from destruction."

"Nay, first the Duchy," he answered gently, whereat she sat up the better to retort on him:

"How, then thy first thought is for the Duchy?"

"Yea, High Mightiness, thy Duchy hath lives very many; thy noble self, though a duchess, hath but one."

"Why, then," quoth she, frowning, "this same one

poor life shall be thy charge. I set Ippolita the Duchess in thy care. Thou art in command of this my citadel to be my lord Constable, in token whereof take now this ring!" But instead of obeying, he fell back a pace, with such a look that the Duchess laughed and Adelisa tittered.

"Now wherefore such dismay, Messire John?" questioned the Duchess in kinder voice. "Dost not count thyself worthy such trust?"

"Nay!" cried he vehemently. "Never a whit I! Trust rather such proved traitor as Sir Philip de Sherbourne, any rogue rather than this roguish self! — Nay, I perceive ye do but jest and make mock of me, fair ladies, nor will I fail ye of my laughter — "

"Indeed," cried Adelisa, "we do not mock, here is no jest, my lord Constable; this was decreed by our Duchess her council."

"So come, thou unworthy wight, be honoured in despite of thy new-found strange humility; take now my ring! I say take it; nay, I do command." So came John to kneel and take the ring and look down on it with troubled eyes.

"Thy finger, man," cried the Duchess. "On thy finger! It shall fit thy littlest — so! Whiles 'tis there, lord Constable of Pentavalon art thou. So rise, my lord, and be seated, for I would have thee tell — now who knocketh on door to plague us? See thou, my Adelisa, say I'd be private. Oh, I'd fain know peace a while if this may ever be — ah, what is't now, child?"

"Oh, my darling," whispered Adelisa from the tapestry-hung door, "he is back again! Friar Gregorius pleadeth speech with thee. Shall I deny him?"

"Nay," sighed the Duchess, "bid him in."

So presently was clack of sandalled feet and there

entered one whose vital presence seemed to fill and overflow this little room (or so thought John). A comfortable plump man, yet very alert and vigorous, whose face showed smoothly round, small of nose, large of brow, massive of chin, with wide-lipped mouth that smiled and smiled; a face that, seeming jovial, was yet not truly so, by reason of the watchful glitter of its small, quick eye (or so thought ever-heedful John).

"Blessings and fair blessings on ye all!" cried he, in full, hearty tones. "And on thee, noble Ippolita, sweet daughter, in especial *Benedicite!*"

"Grand merci, Reverend Friar," she answered, viewing him 'neath langorous eyelids. "I joy to know thee well of thy hurt thus soon."

"Soon!" quoth he, smiling on all and every. "Ay, soothly, for to say, by prayer and fasting, lady, by the sweet saints their mercy, full hale and hearty every deal am I, even this same humble Gregorius that languished late by reason o' murderous steel."

"And whence art thou, my good Gregorius?"

"From village green and market square, gent lady, and, hither coming, learn of chances dire — oh, me! With bruit of treasons 'gainst divers noble lords and —"

"Traitors, Friar! Traitors proved or suspect!"

"Why, an this be so, alas, sweet daughter, and alas! Yet, puissant lady, I Gregorius, as son of Holy Church, do warn thee, sue and pray thee, for thy precious soul's sake, to temper Justice with tender Mercy. Thus if in thy woman's heart be any least doubt of guilt, then I beseech thee, 'stead of cruel death, give prison or banishment. How sayst thou, noble daughter?"

"Thus, my good Gregorius, if in these men, that I once did so trust, be found the least tittle of treason,

I will bestow on them the mercy of a death swift as may be."

"Then, noble Duchess, of thy sweet clemency, should they indeed be doomed, I plead grace of four days on their behalf, four little days of life to prepare them for their shameful dying — ah, gentle my daughter, potent lady, but four short days!"

"Why, then . . . so be it."

"The blessed saints love thee now full well!" quoth he, sinewy hand aloft in blessing. "One other petition, merciful lady, — suffer now that I go in unto these thy prisoners to exhort and comfort them with prayer."

"Not so, Sir Friar; this by no means!" answered John, or ever the Duchess might speak, whereat she frowned, while all unheeding, he continued, "These prisoners have all solace and comfort of Holy Church whenso they will, for here be friars and holy priests aplenty."

"Oh, now," quoth Dom Gregorius, smiling amain on John, "gentle daughter, of your grace, I pray thee who is this speaketh me with such high authority? 'Tis face new to me since last I —"

A trumpet blared beyond the walls, its sudden fanfare rising shrill and clear in defiant summons; at the which warlike clamour the young Duchess started up to look out and down from the narrow casement. Presently was hurry of armed feet and Simon entered, his square face showing grimmer than usual.

"Gracious ladyship," quoth he, "there cometh a herald from Fitz-Urse with four knights demanding instant audience."

"I will hear them, good Simon, half an hour hence in the great hall of the outer castle. Now sound tucket and muster our array."

Thus ensued an ordered bustle and to-do, trumpets

brayed, steel clashed, feet tramped into that wide and lofty hall that rang and echoed to the stir of this armed company. And hither in due season came the Duchess, to seat herself aloft in chair of state, her lords and knights to right and left, flanked by long files of esquires and men-at-arms. Then looking round about, yet nowhere near John, she gestured, saying:

“Let these envoys approach.”

The massive doors at one end of the hall were thrown wide and in strode four armed knights with, before them, their herald resplendent in his tabard, a plump man and pompous, to whom the Duchess now addressed herself.

“Well, now, Messire Pursuivant, let us hear.” Forthwith the herald bowed knee to earth, opened the scroll he bore and looking thereon, spake full-throated:

“Oyez! ‘Unto Ippolita, Duchess of Pelynt, I, Fulk Roger Fitz-Urse, Lord of High Morven and the March, do herewith make proffer of myself in wedlock, the said Noble Lady to espouse me within this day and the Eve of the Holy Saint Gengulphus, thereafter receiving me in all kindliness and submission as her husband and lord of her body and of Pelynt. And this is the fiat of me, to wit Fulk, Roger Fitz-Urse as aforesaid. Let her now make answer, yea or nay, and so shall be Peace, Jolife and Joyance or the fell fury of war.’

“Oyez! Thus saith my master, this same right puissant lord, Noble Lady, it is now for thyself to speak, declare and make answer.”

Now in the great hall was a moment of deep silence, then, throwing back her beauteous head, the Duchess laughed and laughed, heedless nor caring for the many eyes that watched her. At last, her merriment subsiding,

she leaned back in her great chair, gazing down on the herald with her slumberous look and spake him in her smooth, langorous voice:

“So, thus saith your sottish master, this lord of ravage and murder? Well, thus do I make answer!” With the word she was afoot and snatching sword from the nearest scabbard, tossed it clattering to the startled herald’s feet. “Take ye this good steel to Fitz-Urse and say if it be war indeed, then I will never rest until I make an end of him and the evil of him. Go ye!”

And presently, taking up the sword, these envoys departed.

CHAPTER XXIV

TELLETH HOW THE DUCHESS IPPOLITA WAS MADE CAPTIVE

IT was at this time that Pelynt began to gather in might, levies of horses and footmen, silent companies that marched ever at dark, mustering upon Pentavalon. Thus by day armour glinted in street and market square; by night on tower and battlement and wall many dim figures went to and fro, watchful and eager, while in and about the grim desolation of Hangstone Waste, Tomalyn and his foresters kept their ward unseen; but of these all, none were more constantly watchful and alert than John and the mighty Three.

Quoth John on a morning as they broke their fast together:

“Brother Wat, soon as may be, take horse for Bracton Thicket unto Jenkyn a Thorn and Lord Raymond of Fordham; rally then our comrades of the green, every wolf’s-head ye may. Bid Lord Raymond summon his following and come all with speed to the forest hard by Saint Wynan’s Well and there lie close nor let stir a man till cometh the word. . . . And so hither again to me. Is’t understood?”

“Ay, John, I ride now.” So saying, Wat arose, belted sword, donned headpiece and mantle, scowled on Walter, embraced him and other two and strode away.

“Thurstan,” said John, “get thee to Hartley Furze beyond Hangstone Waste, where Tomalyn and his fel-

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lows do lie, and bid them be ready to march on the word. Then hie you back hither.”

“So be it, John.” And having armed and girded him, Thurstan sighed his farewells and was gone.

“Well so, John,” quoth Walter, “and what for myself?”

“Go with me and shalt know.” Forthwith out went they together and so to the Wrykyn Tower, this place of dreadful doom, up narrow, winding stair and so to a small dim cell, bare save for oaken bench and truss of straw.

“Well, what now, John man; what wilt —”

“Hist! Dost hear aught?”

“Ay, by Saint Guthlac, this do I!” answered Walter, glancing about uneasily. “A ghostly muttering, a ghoulish whispering that is and again is not.” Then John brought him to a certain dark corner and here showed him a hole pierced through the masonry.

“Thine ear to this, Walter!” said he. “Now — what?”

Walter obeyed and instantly opened eyes wide with amazement.

“Voices!” he whispered. “Voices that curse thee right heartily, John, in especial one — the lewd yapping o’ that traitorous curdog De Valence. ‘This accursed John’, quo’ he, and, ‘Had my dagger but sped true, we were not in this woeful estate!’ — But what marvel is this, man John?”

“No marvel, Walter, but simple device o’ my contriving. I bore hole ’twixt this cell and next. I pen in one cell the prisoners, thyself in t’other, and through this aurical ’tis now thy duty to hearken and learn from their talk whatso of roguery, past and to be, ye may.”

"Nay, but John, to sit in cell with windy hole likes me not; by the pyx, 'tis no work for the De Benyon!"

"Yet duty of my comrade Walter, a duty that shall peradventure achieve much."

"Well, as thou sayst, John. Though would hadst given this same duty to Wat, that is content to sit him anywhere, so he sit. But as for me —"

"Art scarce yet healed o' thy wound, comrade. Also I would have thee in call."

"Why, so be it, John. Thy Walter shall be all ear."

It was about this time also that Adelisa, this wise and gentle lady, began to watch the young Duchess, at first in a quick and grave anxiety and then with a joyous interest ever more curious. For indeed this so harassed yet prideful lady of Pelynt, no longer serenely assured, was become a creature of strange and sudden moods, one time all gaiety and laughter, the next sad to tears; one hour riding abroad in joyous company, ranging the home meads with hawk and hound, the next sitting woeful and secluded, or berating her bower women till they wept; while the lords of her court, council and household, the grave seniors, shook heads in solemn perplexity, telling each other, "she groweth sick with suspense of coming battle, and small wonder, the poor, vexed maid."

Also, seeing John avoided her and knowing the wherefore, she would command him to her presence suddenly, to jibe at or berate him for no just reason save the one. And thus upon a certain evening quoth she to him, and sternly arrogant:

"So, my lord Constable, I prove thee full harsh jailer to my prisoners, these lords that even now do wait death."

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“My lady,” answered John, meekly patient, “I do but use them as thy prisoners that —”

“In especial, sir, in regard to Julian, Lord of Weare. To pleasure thee, Sir Constable, he must lie in foul dungeon and go in shameful irk of fetters — all at thy bidding, as I do hear.”

“Yea, in good sooth, High Mightiness, for that of all thy prisoners he is chiefest, since he alone hath the secret of the mine in Hangstone —”

“Enough, Messire! He was once my companion and well thought on. Begone now and, pray you, send to me Simon of the archers. This prisoner shall have relief of thy harshness.”

“But lady — Ippolita, I tell thee —”

“Oh, begone and bid Simon hither!”

Now upon a night Adelisa, rising from bed, found the Duchess leaning at narrow casement, her dreamful eyes upraised to a night sky very glorious with stars and sighing very maidenly, though her shapeliness was sheathed from slim arching feet to rounded throat in bright, glistening mail.

“Dearling!” gasped Adelisa. “Oh, wherefore art thou thus armed?”

Forgetting alike plaint of sighs and glory of stars, the Duchess turned, fierce-eyed.

“Ha, wilt pry on me, Adelisa?”

“I watch over thee, mine dear one,” answered the dignified young Adelisa. “Shouldst be in thy bed. And wherefore go thus armed?”

“For that I despise all womanly tires, ay, and the woman’s body they do cover. Ah, would I had been a man born! Lo now, this knightly mail! Doth it not well become me and I it? Have I not gone thus bedight

full oft? Is not this poor heart of mine verily more heart of man than puling woman — ”

“Nay, never, my Ippolita, thine is very woman’s heart grieving for some man — ”

“Never say it, never dare think such shame of me, for I do hate this curse of womanhood! . . . Oh, my Adelisa, hast forgot how my loved father taught me manage of horse and lance, bred me to arms? Dost mind how he ever joyed to see me mailed thus, showing like the son he had hoped and yearned for — ’stead of the puling woman-child I was? Ha, would God had formed me man indeed!”

“And yet, Ippolita, I do think that somewhere is some man shall thank God, one day, for making thee such very woman.”

“A woman! Ay, I am woman, to fold meek hands and bow humble head, submitting all I am to the will of some he-thing shall be my master. . . . A woman in sooth! The thought doth shame me.”

“Nay, but Ippolita — ”

“And Ippolita!” cried the Duchess, clashing furious in her mail. “Ippolita! Oh, a right vile name . . . like neigh of horse, like a sneeze, a — ” She caught back the word gaspingly and meeting her gentle companion’s wondering look, flushed hotly, then she laughed and turned to stare out on the night again.

But now came Adelisa to clasp cherishing arm about her, murmuring tenderly:

“Ah, loved soul, wert thou any other than my Ippolita that so fiercely contemneth gentle love, I should vow thee sick with the sweet unease of love — ”

“Ah, name it not! Speak me no thing of such loathed folly. Go, get thee back to bed! — Nay, see who comes so untimely,” said she angrily, as a heavy fist pounded

on the door. "See who dare trouble me at such hour." Scarce was the door open than in jingled old Simon, grim as ever but therewith mightily dismayed.

"Lady," cried he harshly, "lord Julian is gone! The Lord of Weare is 'scaped and gone!"

"Sancta Maria!" exclaimed the Duchess, clenching passionate hands. "Art sure of this?"

"Beyond all doubting! 'Twas but this morn your ladyship had him forth of the stout Wrykyn and lodged all easefully in the Lion Tower and so, well — now hath he won free and fled clean away!"

"Doth he . . . John . . . doth my Lord Constable know of this?"

"Not yet, noble lady; he rode forth at curfew and is not yet returned."

"Then, Simon, I charge you tell him nought of this — not a word! He shall hear of it from none lips but mine. Take heed and see to this, Simon."

"So be it, lady!"

"Hast made diligent search for the lord Julian?"

"Ay, this hour and more, high and low, and found rope a-dangle whereby we judge he hath got him away across Hangstone Waste."

"Well, Tomalyn watcheth there with his verderers and shall doubtless take him again, I pray Heaven!"

"Howbeit, lady, hadst but left him close pent in the Wrykyn, — ah, never hath no man ever 'scaped from the stout Wrykyn Tower! Ah, hadst but left him there in proper dungeon, lady —"

"Well, I did not! And now mayst leave me, Simon. And see to it none other of my prisoners break prison." But scarce was the stout old archer departed than Ippolita covered her face, wherefore Adelisa, thinking she wept, clasped her in comforting arms, murmuring:

"Oh, my sweeting, grieve not for this wicked Julian's escape, for mayhap —"

"Grieve?" sighed the Duchess, pillowing her head on her gentle companion's ready shoulder, "Oh, truly am I glad therefore. It is for myself I grieve. For . . . oh, Adelisa, I grow all too weak for this burden of state . . . unfitted am I to rule . . . alone! I that am Duchess, even I that have ere now doomed men and watched them die, do now blanch at mere thought of it. . . . Oh, Adelisa, how cometh this? What spells of magic have wrought in me to change my very nature thus?"

"Dear my Ippolita, 'tis most sweet enchantment, 'tis whitest magic that e'en now waketh thy tender womanhood that hath slumbered until now — ah, my dearling, it is — Love!" Now at this the Duchess freed herself and, coming to the narrow casement, leaned there awhile, and when she spoke her voice was softly kind.

"Go now, my Adelisa, get thee to bed. I would be alone — I must think." And the gentle Adelisa, wise in her love, silently obeyed.

Longtime stood the young Duchess thus pensive, gazing wistfully until, as moved by sudden impulse, she caught up hooded cloak, girt it about herself and went forth into the awesome, starry wonder of this fair midsummer night, to stand with eyes uplift to the everlasting glory of the wide heaven and think and think of — herself and one other; to pace restlessly to and fro and dream such things as shamed her that she could so dream despite herself; to wander aimlessly, deep in troubled thought, until she checked to sound of light, firm tread and, knowing whose steps these were, caught her breath and trembled, and hating herself therefore, shrank away into the deepest shadow, thence to watch

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the dim shape of him where he came. She saw the glint of headpiece and mail in the starshine where he had paused to stand head aback, lean face uplifted to gaze up at that narrow casement that opened on the curtained alcove where was her great bed; and seeing how steadfastly he gazed and knowing the reason, she felt her heart leap and swell, and burned now for very shame of it. Suddenly, as she watched this silent, so reverent watcher, she heard sound of hasty feet, beheld one who came speeding through the dark and knew this for Walter who, espying John, ran to seize and shake him in impatient hands. Speaking him low-voiced but with gesture wild and passionate; but who, even so, obedient to John's fierce word and gesture, leapt aside and vanished, while John stood rigid and waited until at last, with slow step scarce to be heard, another shape appeared and a voice spoke soft yet heartily jovial:

“Ho, John a Green, gripe no dagger 'gainst this meek Gregorius that seeketh thee on errand o' mercy mild — ”

“Friar, no time have I now to hear thee or — ”

“Time enow, John, to deliver from harsh death these prisoners do e'en now languish in the Wrykyn yonder. These shall go free and by thy hand.”

“Ah — mine, sayst thou?”

“Thine, Outlaw John, John o' the Wolves'-heads, thine by reason that I do know thee for spy of King Tristan, ay, and of the felon death that waits thee in Gerance, an thou fail in thy mission here! Ho, I know thee, John! I know it must be Ippolita and Pelynt or Tristan's gallows for thee in Gerance. Well, my lord Constable, how sayst thou?”

“That art a much-knowing friar!”

“That feareth not thy steel, John, now or any time,

for I have set down the tale of thee fair writ, shall come instant to the Duchess her hand should I suffer any least harm — ” the words ended in groan, as Friar Gregorius bowed and sank beneath the down-smiting flat of Walter's sword to lie inert.

“Plague on't!” quoth Walter. “Old Guttler turned in my hold; here's witchcraft or mail coil neath his hood. Here's to make sure — ”

“Nay,” quoth John, interposing, “he shall lie fast in the Wrykyn — come — ”

Then a mail-clad form was upon them, a slim lithe shape that staggered and went down headlong beneath the powerful sweep of John's long arm.

“Ha — another!” quoth Walter, stooping with ready sword; but in this moment John was on his knees, staring all dismayed into the mail-girt face of the young Duchess. Dumbly he lifted her and, mute still, gazed upon her, while Walter, beholding, blenched from the pale fury of her and hid himself amid the adjacent shadows. Then, or ever John might find word, she spoke him, gasping a little for very anger:

“Oh, creeping spy! I heard, I saw! Oh, base rogue to have so won my faith and so deceived! Thou thing of shame that would yield me and my people to ruin and despair — this to the black heart o' thee!” And, snatching steel from girdle, she leapt. But John caught her dagger hand and for a while they strove body to body, limbs entwined in fierce grapple, until her strength failed and she moaned to the pain of the arm that crushed her, and he saw her eyes wide and pleading, the eyes of an affrighted maid; and so, forgetting all else, John kissed her and kissed . . . until the dagger fell and she lay all yielding, shivering against his heart. And now at last he spoke, murmuring brokenly:

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“Oh, Ippolita . . . thou loveliness . . . I’d die for thee! Have faith in me . . . doubt thine eyes . . . doubt thine ears and have faith in me . . . Ippolita!”

Now because of his eyes she closed her own and because she trembled and thrilled to the mastery of his arms, scorning herself therefore, she would have screamed, but his quick hand upon her lips held her silent.

“Ha, Walter — quick, man, ere she give alarm!”

Despite her struggles, strong hands pinioned, gagged and bound her deftly; and thus silenced and helpless, she was swathed about in her own cloak and borne swiftly away.

CHAPTER XXV

TELLETH HOW TWO RODE THE FOREST WAYS BY LIGHT OF MOON

THOUGH blinded by the thick folds of her mantle, she knew the horse beneath her and the arm about her and the breast that pillowed her were John's, sensing this from mere contact, for as yet he had uttered no word; and because their pace was easy and John thus dumb, she began to strive against her bonds, whereat to aid his left arm came his right to cradle her more securely, and bending to her muffled head he spoke whispering:

"Hush thee, noble lady! Be still, High Mightiness, and thus endure a little while —"

But now she heard Walter's voice, harsh with impatience:

"Oh, man, spur — spur! Let us speed —"

"Not so, comrade, no need is there for any haste. Instead, tell again and at thy leisure, all didst hear through the wall."

"Why, John, as I harkened, about supper time it was, in loaf of bread was conveyed to them a message, for I heard one of them cry out and read it forth right joyfully."

"Dost mind the words, to speak them nearly as they were writ?"

"Ay, John, somewhat on this wise they ran: 'Good my lords greeting and comfort. For know ye this night, at an hour after midnight, Fitz-Urse shall attack and burn the village of Shallowford, that seeing it direly ablaze, Pentavalon shall be sore dismayed, her citizens

and garrison fly to arms and sally forth, in which confusion ye shall win free while Fitz-Urse with his main battle shall fetch about to surprise the city, leaving divers of his array to hold their army in play.' — Thus or the like ran this accursed message . . . but oh, John man . . . to burn Shallowford, for there is my heart! There liveth she I do love! This sweet Innocence and Fulk's black rogues . . . the village aflame . . . pillage and ravishment! Ha, John man, let us on."

"Why, so be it, Walter, ride you afore us to Saint Wyman's Well, find out where Jenkyn a Thorn lieth hid with his fellows and warn them of our coming. But the night is young and I must rule my Apollo to gentlest amble, lest his fiery paces chance to irk her Gracious Ladyship's tenderness." Here the Duchess kicked furious in her bonds.

"So be it, John," quoth Walter. "Ride ye by the forest track and I'll bring company to meet ye. Do I warn them how dost bring her Grace's Ladyship?"

Here the Duchess writhed again.

"Not so, Walter, on your life — herself shall decide on this anon."

"Why then, fare ye well!" cried Walter and, spurring to a gallop, was off and away so speedily that all sounds of his going were soon died away.

So thus alone rode John and the Duchess through the deep night silence: and they went very slowly, for Apollo being such wise animal, more especially in knowledge of Master John his moods, sensing the present mood of this master in lax knee and loose rein, paused in his ambling ever and anon to crop at tender herbage and so plod on again, chewing in equine content.

It was as John turned aside from the road into the forest way that the moon arose, dimming the stars with her pale splendour, a white magic that touched all things to such new, strange beauty that these leafy solitudes became to John's fervid imagining a world remote where cherished dreams might take form and semblance. Thus then, looking down upon the gracious form he cradled in his arms, his busy mind troubled itself no more with cares for the future, crafty schemes and cunning stratagems, the near approach of battle with chance of victory or defeat, wounds, death or capture; instead he could but think upon the sweet madness of that fleeting moment whenas he had kissed her and she (Oh, abiding wonder!) had seemed to kiss him in passionate response. Now, trembling to the memory of this, he stooped until his yearning lips might touch the cloak that hid the lure of her face and, checking the burning words he would have uttered, he contrived to laugh and speak her lightly, saying:

"Oho, dread lady, an I do live through what must be anon, I will some day make o' this a notable merry song on this wise:

"How John upon his breast when moon shone bright
Bore beauteous limbs in mannish armour dight —"

Here these same beauteous limbs became so violently rebellious that, when he had quelled them:

"My lady Ippolita," said he gently, "if, for the general weal, thou wilt neither scream nor strive, now will I free thee of these bonds. Is't agreed? If yea, be pleased to nod thy noble head." The Duchess nodded forthwith; and very soon was free to chafe and cherish her cramped limbs as best she might, while John eyed

her askance, expectant of her furious reproaches; but she, nowise heeding him, glanced up at the rising moon and round about upon this vague and shadowy wilderness and bowing head upon hands, sighed and moaned so distressfully that John questioned her in quick apprehension:

“Ippolita . . . lady, I . . . God forbid I should anyways have harmed thy tenderness — ”

“Oh, abomination!” said she, in weeping voice. “To be so vilely used . . . snatched up, dragged away like poor sheep to the slaughter! Thy cruel arms! Thy ruthless hands! I am shamed . . . body and soul!”

“Now, by the Holy Rood, not so, Ippolita!” quoth John, very earnestly. “No thought had I to harm or shame thee. I did but as I must — ”

“Yea, yea!” she sobbed. “I am become creature hateful to myself, a poor thing bruised of body and broke of spirit — ”

“Ha, now God forgive me!” cried he very woefully; and seeing her thus humbled and seeming to weep, clasped her to his breast, striving to soothe and comfort her, insomuch that Apollo, (this wise animal), sensing what was toward, paused to turn his unlovely head and roll his eye at them; these humans who, embracing and embraced, alternate pleaded with and reproached each other; and seeing moreover how this woman’s head now lay on his master’s shoulder and how that master kept his own so resolutely averted, Apollo switched contemptuous rattail, snorted and stooped to nibble at lush grass, though keeping one ear back-cocked to hear his master’s voice so strangely gentled in humble entreaty.

“Oh, Ippolita, no thought of least evil had I towards thee . . . even when I held thee so fast locked up in

my embrace. . . . I could but think on all thy loveliness and felt shame lest I hurt thee indeed."

"This shall never justify or absolve thee that hath so humbled me to my own scorn that I shall never — ah, never again be the Ippolita that was. And to be thus shamed and by — such as thyself!"

"My lady, I am —"

"Thou!" she cried. "Thou art from my enemy Tristan of Gerance —"

"Even as I said, Ippolita, and —"

"Thou'rt outlaw! A felon! A spy of Tristan! 'Twas thus Gregorius denounced thee."

"Ay, he did so, lady . . . and would have me loose thy prisoners!"

"And what is thy secret mission here in Pelynt?"

"This shall be humbly confessed one day, Ippolita, but not now —"

"Ay, soothly, thou art close and stealthy wretch, a dark and secret man as ever!"

"And yet, Ippolita, a man, now as ever, to die for thee and Pelynt an need be —"

"Oh, words! Words!" she cried bitterly.

"Yet tonight, I dare to say, shall be deeds also."

"Yea!" quoth she scornfully. "To bear me away thus at thy mercy! Here was right valiant deed!"

"And, lady, very necessary to the weal of thy Duchy and very self."

"To buffet and smite me headlong!"

"Alack, lady, I knew thee not in thy so mannish guise. Moreover, I had learned but then how Fitz-Urse schemed to burn Shallowford and you, believing this traitorous Friar, would have screamed me into prison; and I, thus helpless, Shallowford would have flamed —"

And now they began to reproach and retort on one another in this wise:

THE DUCHESS: Ah, that cunning nimble tongue of thine is marvellous apt to thine own justification! Oh, I do scorn all men; 'tis vile sex, and in especial thy most hateful self.

JOHN: Well and good, lady, to scorn this John showeth thee wise! But as to scorning mankind, well — dost show thyself even now very manlike, by my troth dost ape vile man so truly that I for man mistook ye a while since. Ay, and even now, my arm about thee so, hast such manly semblance, such virile ferocity o' tone and speech, thou art to me no more than sullen man petulant with youth —

SHE: Now be silent, thou spying outlaw! Had but my poor bruised body the strength, I would light down and walk and so free me of thy hateful nearness.

Scarce had she spoken than John was afoot and she, getting her very nimbly into the saddle, tugged at rein, striving to wheel and turn the great horse; but Apollo merely shook gaunt head and plodded forward; hereupon she goaded him with her golden spurs, whereat he snorted fiercely and reared so dexterously that he contrived to dismount his rider into the ready arms of his master; which business achieved, he rolled knowing eye at them, cropped a mouthful of grass here and there, wandering unnoticed. For John was looking down into eyes that gazed up into his, eyes at first wide and bright with anger that changed — and changed — until they wavered at last as, uttering soft, inarticulate cry, she turned in his embrace and hid her face against him. Now, feeling how she trembled thus against him, John instinctive held her the closer

and trembled also, and set her down and turning aside from her, laughed as best he might, saying:

"Good faith, now am I heartily glad for thy so mannish seeming!"

"Sayst thou?" she murmured, and throwing back mail coif, shook down the rippling splendour of her hair and coming where the moonlight fell, questioned him in gentle mockery: "Show I now so very manlike, John a Green?"

But speechless stood John, rapt by her warm and vital womanhood; her vivid beauty made for him this fair night-world more beautiful; the lure of her seemed all about him, calling from the vast silences, stealing to him in the pale magic of the moon, whispering in a myriad leafy stirrings, drawing, compelling him; he took a slow pace towards her and she, watching from the silky curtain of her hair, smiled. . . . A gusty snort behind him, a velvet muzzle that touched his cheek and, turning swiftly, John bowed his head against Apollo's great neck and fondled him, saying:

"Lo, now, my lady Ippolita, said I not this Apollo was wise horse? Thus doth he mind me of my duty. Come now, get thee to saddle I pray and let us on."

"Nay, wherefore this so sudden haste?" sighed she, beginning to coil her long tresses beneath hood and mail coif. "I'll not be so bustled. Besides, I do love these forest lands — yea, indeed, on such night as this. Ah, dost not see, dost not feel something of its spell?"

"Verily, do I, and yet —"

"Well, doth it not fill thee with most strange rapture?"

"Beyond all telling. But —"

"Here, oh, here is peace at last, with sweet solace such as I have never known."

"And yet, Ippolita, in this same forest country lieth Fulk Fitz-Urse intent on bloody havoc — "

"Well but, John, here is Jingling John, and how shall Fulk and all his powers avail 'gainst this so wise, valiant, cunning and crafty gleeman?"

"No whit, I pray God!" said John, frowning. "And now, my Lady, be pleased to mount and let us forward."

"Why then, good my lord Constable, come see that all thy lady's womanish tresses be well hid. And lace me this camail close, that none shall know me."

So came he to aid her, drawing and lacing the fine link mail over smooth cheeks, above round chin and close upon these low-arching brows, 'neath which eyes watched him, bright with smiling malice to see him so grimly intent and his fingers so awkward about the business. At last it was done to her wish and, seeking no aid of him, she swung lightly to the high saddle; but now, she must have him shorten the stirrups for her; then, handling the reins, and with John's steel-clad head at her elbow, the Duchess Ippolita rode on through the magic twilight of these silent woodlands. Slowly she rode and speaking no word, but oft it befell that mute John would glance up at her to see her eyes down-bent on him; so, speaking not, they would gaze until some passing shadow dimmed them to each other's sight, yet still they gazed. Thus journeyed they in a silent communion more eloquent than speech and therewith a growing intimacy. At last she questioned him, soft-voiced and sudden:

"Pray thee, now is my name a sneeze, a hiccough or like neigh of horse?"

John's lean, stern features were transfigured by a

smile very youthful when, soft-voiced as she, he answered:

"Yea, verily! Hark now — 'Ippolita'! 'Tis sneeze of færie, chuckle of elf, lapping of moonlit waters in darkling wood. 'Tis small, soft song that dieth in a breath, too sweet for long endurance."

"Ah, John," she murmured, smiling down on him, "it was my mother's name. She was lady of the far South and no whit like to me, for she was dark, dark and gentle as the night. My noble father loved her passing well and yearned him for a son, and . . . alas, she gave him me . . . and died! So my lord Duke bred me up to arms, as I had verily been his son . . . and I have lived all my days striving to seem indeed the son of his desire. Therefore have I ever hated and scorned my womanhood. And this thing called — love! The thought of kisses and embracements shamed and angered me. Well, John, how say you, what think you?"

"That where true love abideth can be no shame."

After this, they travelled in pensive silence some while.

"Hast travelled beyond seas, John?"

"Ay, I have wandered very far," sighed he.

"Why then, tell me somewhat of thy journeying."

"Well, lady, I have heard sweet songs and noble poesy in fair Languedoc, I have walked to and fro in aged Rome throned everlasting upon her seven hills. I have beheld the wonders of the Moors in Spain and gotten me something of their healing art and chymic mysteries. I have adventured strange seas and stranger people — ay, I have journeyed very far."

"And yet," said she, looking down on him in large-eyed wonder, "what hath it all given thee?"

"Memories!" he answered wistfully. "And a kindlier

judgment of this our so valiant-striving Humanity.”

“And — thou’rt outlaw! Thou’rt a poor singer of songs?”

“And — your gracious ladyship’s High Constable!” said he, with wry smile.

“Ay, forsooth, thou art my lord Constable and I am now to tell thy lordship how one of thy prisoners hath ’scaped thee.”

“Sayst thou?” quoth John, halting.

“Indeed, my lord, for this night, by whose treachery none knoweth, the lord Julian of Weare brake prison and is fled.”

John stared up at the moon so very bright above them, he gazed round about upon the boskages that shut them in and, with not so much as glance at the speaker, strode on again, shaking his head like one moved beyond speech.

“Well?” she demanded in quick petulance. “Hast nought to say?”

“Never a word, lady!”

“Oh, blame, blame me for this!” cried she angrily. “Loose on me thy bitter reproaches, speak and be done!”

“Lady, ’twere but waste o’ breath!”

“Yet dost scowl and clench fist against me! So come then, — lash me with thy cruel, venomed tongue, smite me with thy vengeful hand for, here in this hateful wilderness, I am no more than poor woman at thy mercy.”

“Howbeit, High Mightiness, this doth explain Fulk’s sudden move ’gainst Shallowford.”

“How so?”

“Lord Julian hath reached and warned him how we, having discovered his secret mine in Hangstone Waste,

would have made it his destruction. And so is all our scheming made of none avail."

But in this same moment they gazed on each other in amaze, for on the air was sound very strange to hear in such desolation, at such hour, the distressful wailing of a child. Guided by this they turned aside into the denser woods and so came on a crouching woman who, peering at them with eyes of terror, clasped a babe to her bosom in frantic arms and strove to flee them, though reeling with weariness.

"Nay, now," cried the Duchess, "thou poor soul, flee us not nor fear . . . ah, why dost weep?"

"Oh, kind my masters," sobbed the woman, "the way be so long. All day I've been afoot . . . and my little Rollo ailing . . . and twice roving soldiers beset me but . . . I be fleet o' foot, so we ha' come safe . . . but now I be so wearied . . . and my little Rollo —"

"Whither would ye, good woman?"

"To Shallowford . . . but 'tis so far and I so mazed wi' going — all foredone I be —"

Down lighted the Duchess and saw the speaker for a young woman and comely, though haggard and worn with hard travel, and set an arm about her, saying kindly:

"Now comfort thee, my sister, forget thy griefs, for shalt come safe to Shallowford this night."

"Oh, now," gasped the woman, peering, "if thou be man, thou speakest me like holy angel."

"Nay," said the Duchess, with trill of soft laughter, "sooth for to say I am merest human. Come now, up with thee and ride. Nay, first give me thy babe, thy little Rollo; suffer me, sister."

So the wearied mother gave up her babe unfearing, this wailing bundle that, cherished in the young

Duchess' vigorous arms, hushed on her deep bosom, presently slept, and she looking down, smiling and murmurous:

"So small and helpless! Such little hands!" And John, watching, knew her in this moment more beautiful and altogether lovelier than she had ever been; and she, chancing to meet his look, bowed her stately head above the little sleeper, saying:

"Set me this weary mother on your Apollo, lest she sink and swoon away." But ere he might do so, rose the mournful hooting of an owl from the woods before them; once it came, and twice, and after brief interval a third time, whereto John answered in like manner.

"Yonder come friends," said he; "now how shall I name thee?"

"I'll be errant knight, John, and what better name than Roland. Oh, but this adventure liketh me well; come, let us meet these friends."

And presently forth of the underwoods beside the way rode Walter, leading a horse ready caparisoned, and beside him a squat man in shirt of rusty mail, a powerful fellow bowed of leg, hairy of visage and shaggy of head who, beholding John, came running, both long arms outstretched in eager welcome:

"Ha, John," cried he, as they embraced, "fair greeting to thee, brother! Us do ha' missed thee woundily, ay so, b' the Blessed Bones! And us do be hither come at thy summons, John, to strike in and loose shaft for thee, as ever."

"Now God love thee, Jenkyn!" quoth John. "How many do ye muster?"

"Two hundred, thirty and five is the tale, John. And every man wi' chain jack and steel headpiece, a

very wight company, by Cock's bones and full fain for to see thee, brother."

"Rode the lord Raymond of Fordham with ye, comrade?"

"Ay, right sikerly and wi' lances sixty and four. He waiteth ye along wi' the Green Brotherhood in our close camp ayont Saint Wynan's Shrine. Ha, but," quoth Jenkyn, gesturing where stood the Duchess, slim and shapely in her glistening mail, "what fair young lordling is here?"

"A roving knight," answered John, glancing at silent Walter, who nodded, bright-eyed. "Sir Roland, here standeth Jenkyn a Thorn, one of the Brotherhood of the Green, even as I, and a very man, Sir Roland, to trust and swear by; and, moreover, a notable good archer."

"Why, then, good Jenkyn," said the Duchess, reaching him her mailed hand, "I greet thee well and am fain to thy friendship."

"Lording," answered Jenkyn, touching this slender mailed hand to heart and brow, "us be hither come at John his bidding for to smite Fulk, and tonight with John to lead us, shalt see how us poor outlaws can fight, ay by Cock's body! So come now, follow ye!"

CHAPTER XXVI

TELLETH OF THE ONFALL AT SHALLOWFORD

PUSHING through a dense leafage, Jenkyn a Thorn pointed with his bowstave; whereat the Duchess reined in her horse beside him, to gaze wide-eyed down into a great hollow bright with the moon and shut in by thickets and mighty forest trees; for here, gathered about small, smokeless fires, was the wildest, fiercest company she had ever seen; grim-faced men of all conditions, desperate-seeming fellows scarred and lean, ragged and unkempt in battered headpieces and rusty mail, who seldom laughed and spake each other in growling murmurs, for these, being outlaws all and hunted men, were prone to stealth and silence.

“Ho, brothers,” cried Jenkyn, “I bring him ye wait for — lo ye, here now is our John o’ the Green.” As he spoke, down towards them rode John, astride his tall horse Apollo, at sight of whom they came hasting one and all, thronging close about him to voice harsh greeting, to grasp his ready hand, to clap him on mailed knee and thigh and back, hailing him as friend and brother, and none more hearty in their acclaim than young Raymond, Lord of Fordham, conspicuous in his bright mail and richly blazoned surcoat; now, though they made no outcry of cheering, their faces showed them so unfeignedly glad that the Duchess, drawing deep breath, spake on hot impulse:

“Ah, Jenkyn man, by my faith, such proper men should be no outlaws!”

“Faith, lording, and so says I,” growled Jenkyn,

“yet outlaws us do be, each and every, banned by church, — wolves’-heads we for the slaughter, dost see, to be hanged on tree or gibbet and so to rot. . . . Ha, see now, they cry on John for to sing; he hath made a song of outlaws; hearkee, ’tis rare song, I trow.” They saw John raise his hand and all voices hushed; but instead of singing, he spake them in his clear, ringing voice:

“Brothers all, of the good greenwood, hither have I summoned ye to desperate purpose. Ye that are outlaws even as I, ye that being hunted men must needs fight that ye may live, this night I would have ye do battle not for ourselves but in cause of others that be strangers to us every one. Yonder, a bowshot beyond the ford, sleepeth a goodly village that, ere dawn, by the will of damned Fulk Fitz-Urse, shall go up in flame, except we stand to its defence, perilling our lives for sake of these poor village folk that have no claim on us save our common humanity. And I can offer ye no booty or reward save this, — that in so adventuring our bodies to the good of others, in saving this village of Shallowford from fire and ravishment, these poor folk from death, their women and children, these innocents, from shame and outrage, we do that shall ring abroad like trumpet blast, and ourselves know, ay, each one of us, that we have achieved a right good act and quit ourselves like men. Brothers o’ the Greenwood, I would have ye bait the Bear. How say ye?”

Rose a joyous hum, a hoarse and swelling murmur, hearty voices crying all:

“We’ll fight, John.”

“Ay, we’ll strike in with thee, brother.”

“To bait the Bear, this accursed Fitz-Urse, this will we.”

"Ay, by my head, we'll tickle yon Bear wi' grey-goose shafts!"

"Well, lording," quoth Jenkyn, turning to the Duchess, "how think ye o' John?"

"I think," said she soft-voiced, her deep eyes shining, "this was better than any song, Jenkyn. Come, let us go down to them." So saying, she reined her horse deftly down the steep and rode beneath a great tree, whose wide-spreading branches made a gloom, for here was John and hither Lord Raymond came striding to greet him, saying:

"Ha, John o' Green, right glad am I for to see thee again! Ay me, good friend, but for thyself, myself would now be no more than dead bones . . . self-slain! 'Stead o' the which I am a man and life is sweet. And by this night's work, mayhap I shall win me back to our noble Ippolita's grace and so to my loved lady — Adelisa. How sayst thou, John?"

"That it is very like!" he answered, glancing furtive where sat the Duchess all unnoticed.

And now, down from the bush-crowned bank above came sturdy Tomalyn, his foresters ranked orderly behind and with these rode Thurstan.

"What, Tomalyn! Hither, comrade!" called John, "How many are ye?"

"Five score and three, John, and every man chosen by me, ay, and what's more — " here suddenly espying the Duchess, despite the shadow, Tomalyn stared and was dumb, whereat she frowned down on him and setting finger to ruddy lip, shook her head.

"Jenkyn, where now is Wat?"

"Away, John, — off and away wi' Diggory Brock, to watch the road and warn us o' Fulk's curst knaves when they shall come."

And presently beneath this tree, all such as had command took council together how best to order their battle, each man speaking in turn: and presently thus said John:

"Comrades all, I am persuaded Fulk shall send no great force hither, since he and his powers will attempt surprisal of the city. But whoso cometh against this village, few or many, must cross the river, therefore I judge 'twere best we meet them at the ford. There let our bowmen be posted in close array, with my lord Raymond and I, each with thirty lances to right and left beyond the river outflanking our archers. So will we meet the enemy. Is't agreed?"

"Yea, John — "

"Ay, by Cock's bones! And how then?"

"Why then, and ha' Jenkyn and thou Tomalyn, heed this well, — let no man speak or stir until the enemy's vanward is deep in mid-stream, then lose at them amain, ply them with three discharges; this done, wind thy horn, Tomalyn, so shall lord Raymond and I with our two companies charge their shattered ranks both left and right. Then archers sling bows, out swords and smite them in front and methinks they shall scatter with never a chance to rally. How think ye?"

"Ay, by Cock, this should serve!" quoth Jenkyn. "Yet how an Fulk come in force?"

"Send we three horsemen spurring for the city, for to summon the Lord Seneschal, and whiles we hold them here at the ford, Sir Richard and all his powers shall assail them suddenly flank and rear, and so, mayhap, make end of Fulk and his evil once and for all."

"So be it, John!" quoth Tomalyn. "Let us marshal our companies and take our ground."

Now as they mustered in array, Jenkyn's fierce out-

laws, Tomalyn's sturdy foresters, and lord Raymond's mail-clad horsemen, John, looking about, beckoned Walter and, drawing him aside, spake him very earnestly.

"Comrade, thou'rt scarce yet healed of thy wound — "

"Nay, John, hale am I as thyself and able for lusty swordwork as any man."

"Therefore, Walter, because thou art indeed right cunning in fight and valiant to Death, into thy care this night I set the Duchess Ippolita, since well I know how that nought may anyways harm her, whiles thou hast strength to wield thy Guttler sword."

"Ha, John — good lack now; this doth mean I must bide idle with a woman like a woman, whiles ye manful fight! Out on't! Here's that shall break a De Benyon's heart, shrivel his marrow, nay by Saint Guthlac — "

"Choose now five of the fellowship, Walter, for in thy hands doth lie the weal of this great Duchy — "

"Nay, but John, oh, brother, to mumble my fingers whiles others fight! Oh, piteous! Ah, woe and a wannon! I feel myself very curdog, a creeping worm, a crawling pismire, a — " He paused as came one running very fleetly, a slim, shapely youth whom Jenkyn hailed as Diggory Brock, and who now halted beneath the council tree to lean on long bowstave and catch his breath and yet spake, gasping:

"They come, brothers — scarce three mile hence — by the forest road — and horsemen all — a goodly array — "

"How many, Diggory man, to thy count?"

"Five hundred — ay, more, I told of them, Jenkyn."

"Say now," quoth Walter, "came my comrade Watkyn back with thee, Diggory?"

"Nay, he would not by no means — "

"Is he mounted or afoot?"

"Mounted . . . and they ride so loose and unordered . . . Wat must bide for to essay somewhat against them — "

"Ha, the numps!" groaned Walter. "The lovely jolt-head — one 'gainst five hundred! So must I now to the fool — "

"So shalt thou not!" muttered John in his ear. "Thy duty lieth yonder — come!" So saying, he mounted Apollo and turned where the Duchess sat watching; but as they approached, she wondered to see Apollo, this unlovely steed, quite transfigured, his great bony head proudly upreared on arching neck, his one eye full and bright, ears cocked and nostrils aquiver, his whole powerful body strung and eager for action. And from this horse that seemed to snuff the battle afar, she looked on this man, so serenely masterful and dominant, so gently assured and yet whose voice sounded wistful and anxious as, bending above her, he spoke that none other might hear:

"Ippolita . . . lady, I go now to take my post. . . . But as for thyself, yonder is Sir Walter and five others, trusty men all, to ward thee. Bide hereabout, I pray thee, and be ruled by Walter . . . nor adventure thee too nigh the battle . . . where chance arrow may smite thee or — "

"Enough, my Sir John-fool," she murmured, "nor waste thy breath! These right valiant men, and at thy bidding, will front death for me and my Duchy — and wilt thou have me so mean-souled, so craven to skulk and hide? Not I, by God's good light! With thee and them will I ride this night to live or die, as God so willeth."

"Alack!" sighed John. "I feared this! So needs must

I compel thee. Ho, there!" he called. "Roger — Hugo — hither to me!" At his call forthwith came two of the outlaws, large men, ragged and rusty, one that scowled and one that grinned, yet both ferocious of aspect.

"Brothers," quoth John, "lo ye, this young knight is of valour so desperate, he would rush upon death, but he is a great lord akin and very precious unto Ippolita, the potent Duchess of Pelynt, that set him in my care; so it is I will have ye keep him out o' the battle, lest he take scathe and the Duchess chasten me shrewdly therefore. Hugo, to his right bridle rein, Roger to his left."

"Content ee, brother John," quoth Hugo, grinning. "Us'll keep ee safe, eh, Roger?"

"Ar!" growled Roger, scowling.

"And so, Right Noble," murmured John, leaning near the lovely mailed face that frowned on him, "fare thee well. God keep thee, and . . . should I not come back to thee, know that poor John is thy man and . . . ever shall be — Fare thee well!"

As he spake the frown vanished and for a long and breathless moment they gazed each on the other, then down swept her lashes, she swayed towards him, his arms enfolded her . . . he bent to those dark lashes that veiled her too betraying eyes; and presently he rode away and on his quivering lips the salt of her tears.

So came John to that level grassy stretch where the lord Raymond, having marshalled his sixty-four lances into two companies, was being further armed with great battle helm; but when his esquires brought John such another, he shook his head at the ponderous thing, saying he had liefer fight with his face bare.

Now as these two companies — their long lances sloped — wheeled and rode away, it was upon this unarmed face the young Duchess gazed so wistfully

until the last glimmer of their armour had vanished amid the leaves, and this wide green basin showed all empty and deserted. Then she sighed amain and urged her horse forward and with her the five outlaws, two of whom marched close at her horse's head, while hard by Walter drooped disconsolate in his saddle.

"Whither now, fair Nobility?" he questioned in voice 'twixt sigh and groan. Answered the Duchess, low-voiced and strangely meek:

"I would but come where I may see somewhat of — of that which is to be."

"Well, come then, Highness," sighed Walter, "for verily so would I!"

They climbed the steepy bank, they followed narrow, leafy ways, they crossed broad glades until, through dense leafage, they glimpsed a dazzling glory where flowed the river, smooth and broad and deep hereabouts ere it shallowed to the distant ford with the grassy forest road beyond; and thither their straining eyes were turned in a dreadful expectation, as at Walter's whispered command, they halted.

It was a windless night, hushed and deadly still, an awful quietude that seemed to wax ever more ominous as if every created thing held its breath waiting — waiting for the dreadful thing that soon was to be, or so thought the Duchess Ippolita, as she stared wide-eyed upon that distant ford, where death lay crouched and so close hidden that, look how she might, her anxious eyes caught no least movement or faintest blink of steel. But sudden in her ears was vague sound, a faint whisper, a soft murmuring that swelled and grew with every beat of her troubled heart, louder and ever more loud . . . a busy hum harsh and menacing, the muffled trampling of many horse hoofs . . . a jingling of harness, hoarse mutter of voices . . . a throaty laugh.

And now she saw: flash and flicker of steel . . . vague shapes of horses and men; four abreast they advanced, rank on rank, filling the forest road far as sight could reach, coming leisurely and at their ease.

Horses snorted and whinnied, hoofs splashed at the ford . . . deep and deeper, as on they came, helmets flashing, ring mail glimmering. . . . The Duchess held her breath for now the river seemed athrong with them.

Then rose Jenkyn's harsh outcry and instantly from every tree, every bush and thicket death sped amain at his summons, — for, hard smitten by that storm of arrows, the vanguard of these invaders checked, reeled and — was not; instead was wild confusion of rearing horses that fell to splash furiously or lie inert amid floundering men who shouted or stilly shapes that were dumb, while mingled with the dreadful clamour of the smitten rose wild shouts of alarm and fearful dismay from the close-jostling ranks behind.

But shrill and clear rang the notes of Tomalyn's horn and out upon this surging, riotous confusion, — out from the woods to right and left — charged the companies of Lord Raymond and John, to crash in with resistless shock of breaking lances, din of blows and roar of desperate conflict; and now the outlaws, these wild men, were across the ford and busied with whirling axe and thrusting sword.

Beset thus in front and on both flanks, the enemy gave back . . . broke at last, scattered, and the battle roared away in merciless pursuit.

About now it was that Walter, gazing thereafter with yearning eyes, heard sudden outcry beside him, beheld a horse that reared, flinging men right and left, saw the Duchess, stooped low in the saddle, leap away in swift career and, calling alternate on her to stay and Saint Guthlac to aid, spurred furiously in chase.

CHAPTER XXVII

TELLETH OF ONE THAT DIED

JOHN sheathed sword and, leaning wearily in the saddle, breathed deep and looked about him; he saw trampled grass fouled with blood, strewn with fallen weapons and the carcasses of horses and men stiffening in death, for the conflict had raged with a fierce desperation hereabouts where the enemy had rallied for a last stand. In the distance was vague clamour where men yet fought and screamed and died; but the battle was won long since.

Presently, lifting heavy head, John looked round about on what remained of his battered company, drooping men on blown horses, men who groaned or spake each other breathlessly, men who laughed shrill in fierce exaltation, but who now at his word, set themselves in array the while he numbered them.

“But nineteen!” said he. “Well, the debate was something sharp, and this night ye men of Pelynt, good my comrades, ye have borne yourselves so featly your lord should take pride in ye.”

“He doth, John, he doth!” cried a cheery voice, and to them rode my Lord Raymond, with the survivors of his own hard-smitten following; and my lord’s great casque showed many a dint, his emblazoned surcoat was stained and torn, but his laughter boomed loud in his cumbrous helm as he reached to grasp John’s mailed hands. “Thou’rt alive and hale, John, glory to God. Oh, ’twas sweet affray, good friend! We have baited the Bear for thee, eh, John? There shall be few of

Fulk's accursed rogues win safe to his camp. Ha, by the Blessed Rood, this hath been night o' fair doing, for the which I do thank thee from mine heart, John a Green. Pray thee now, are we for Pentavalon? Dare I now adventure me within sight of my dear lady Adelisa? How thinkest thou, my wise John man?"

"Yea, I'll warrant me!" answered John. "Come then, my lord, let us ride forthright."

So they presently left this place of death, riding now like the conquerors they were, only John's face showed downcast and he sighed, insomuch that my lord questioned him at last:

"What aileth thee, friend John? Art no wise scathed, ha?"

"Nay, I grieve for the dead . . . this sorry waste of young manhood."

"Comfort thee, John; the most o' these slain were our enemies."

"Yet men even as we, believing in their cause. And to be snatched thus unkindly from life . . . oh, by my soul, bitterly do I hate war!"

"How, John — how!" gasped the young lord. "Hate war, quoth a?" He had done off his helm and John smiled grimly to see his youthful visage show all amazed.

"Yea, verily, war is a curse, a plague o' the devil —"

"But . . . nay, but," stammered my lord, "to fight it is our nature, and what other employ is there for one o' gentle blood? A man may not hunt alway —"

John laughed harshly, and shook grave head, sighing, then wheeled suddenly as his quick ear caught a feeble, wailing cry that ended in dolorous groaning.

"Water! Oh . . . for love o' God . . ."

Thus guided, John came where lay one in a rich

armour, who stared up at him with eyes of anguish in face convulsed with the throes of approaching death.

"A sup of water . . . for the love . . . of God!"

"Ha!" cried one beside John. "'Tis dog of Fitz-Urse, see his blazon of the Bear! Here's for him!" But as the speaker raised sword to smite, John stayed the blow and, dismounting, stooped above this dying suppliant.

"What wouldst now, John?" questioned my lord, riding near.

"That I would one should do to me in like case, my lord; cherish him somewhat."

"But, good lack, man, he is enemy, a rogue of accursed Fitz-Urse."

"And lieth at our mercy."

"John, ha, John, I'm all afire to get me sight of my lady Adelisa and thou — thou to so delay me —"

"Not I, lord," said John, his dexterous hands already busied to the sufferer's relief. "Ride on, I shall follow whenso I may."

"Nay, first let me bring water."

This done, the young lord yet tarried, watching John's deft surgery in no little wonderment.

"So thou art skilled in leechcraft, John a Green?"

"Ay, somewhat. Bid one bring me my cloak and leathern wallet strapped to my saddlebow."

"Good faith, John, I am loath to leave thee so . . ."

"Nay, begone," quoth John, busied now with salve and lint from his wallet of medicaments, "away now to thy happiness and God go with thee."

"By the mass, John, now might any think thee reverend son of Holy Church, had they not seen thee so fierce in battle. The saints keep and bring thee safe . . . I will dispatch friends to company thee, and so,

for the nonce, farewell." Thus with tramp and jingle my lord and his company rode away.

Having tended the stricken man's grievous hurts as best he might, John gave him to drink and thereafter bathed his haggard face; and presently, with his head pillowed on John's cloak, this wounded man looked on him great-eyed and, sighing his relief, spake in stronger voice:

"Messire, whom must I . . . thank?"

"They call me John o' the Green."

"Am I hurt . . . to death?"

"I pray God no."

"And thou . . . thou art my . . . enemy."

"Not so, Sir Knight."

"Yea, indeed, I saw thee in the battle's forefront . . . thyself led the first charge and wert . . . fiercest in the pursuit."

"Yea, verily!" quoth John, smoothing a bandage. "For verily I do so hate the folly of war and its abomination that whenso fight I must, I fight my hardest that it be sooner ended."

"Well, it certes endeth for me this night and forever!"

"An this be so, shouldst find some mede of comfort in such assurance."

"Comfort?" groaned the stricken man. "How so? For though thy leechcraft hath eased my bodily anguish, my unshriven soul fainteth in sickness beyond thy skill. . . . Ah, sir, I am Everard de Rusper . . . brother at arms and boon companion of . . . Fulk Fitz-Urse and . . . his sins have been . . . mine, and tonight here lie I . . . adying with none to absolve or . . . loose me of my sins, my poor soul so . . . heavy burdened that, 'stead of soaring heavenward . . . it must sink — oh, sweet Jesu pity me — sink to the . . . nethermost pit!"

"But yet, Sir Everard, an a man truly repent —"

"Ah, I do — I do! Yet in the halcyon days my . . . body was so strong . . . little recked I of my . . . soul. But now, alas, in this . . . my dark hour . . . broken all and feeble . . . with pale Death beckoning . . . nought is left me but my soul . . . and if this be damned —"

"Now comfort thee, Messire, for God is all merciful, I dare to say."

"Oh, now, wert thou but . . . holy friar or . . . saintly father to hear me confess —"

"Well, instead, know me thy friend —"

"Nay, enemies we!" gasped the dying knight. "Enemies! For I die of thee . . . thine was the arm smote me down, thy horse trampled me . . . enemies are we!"

"Nay, sir, rather are we two men in the wildwood, alone with their God. So now do I pray God's comfort on thee. This night I fought that divers innocent folk might live unharmed. As for hurting thee, it was but a chance of close battle, for now, on my soul, I would heal thee an I might." Now even while he uttered these words, into John's ready clasp crept Sir Everard's feeble hand as, sighing deep, he spake:

"Ah . . . friend, thou art such man I . . . might have loved. . . . And now, lying thus on . . . the very brink o' death, as these my bodily eyes fail me, the . . . eyes of my soul . . . do see marvellous clear the right and wrong of all things, since ever life was. But Death . . . his cold hand impatient . . . plucketh me! Bend near for now . . . now must I tell thee . . . of Fulk, his wickedness . . . schemed o' late . . . 'gainst the Duchess . . . Ippolita. . . . Fulk is my friend, so would I save him . . . from himself . . . turn him from that shall damn him . . . in his dying

hour! Oh, John a Green . . . thou, do thou, I pray thee . . . prevent and save him . . . Ha, — water!”

Once again John's deft hands were quick in ministry and thus again was Sir Everard's strength renewed and his dying voice stronger:

“Fulk lusteth for Ippolita her beauty and Pelynt . . . he liveth but to achieve by . . . all or any means. Hark then — on bank of this river is an ancient stead-ing with a mill, where liveth one Dame Ursula Stowe that was . . . foster mother unto the Duchess who loveth her . . . wonderous well. Now heed me! Should all other fail him, Fulk will . . . seize this dame . . . send her ears unto the Duchess with threat of further torment, except . . . Ippolita yield herself unto his will and make him lord of her and . . . Duke of Pelynt — ”

“And when doth Fulk so purpose?”

“This I know not.”

“It shall not be tonight, I judge?”

“Nay, it were impossible. But — watch thou! Pledge me thy faith to prevent and stay him from this black iniquity. . . . Thus in my dying hour I may save him from himself and God's just anger, for . . . he was my friend.”

“I swear this!” said John. “I swear by Holy Cross that Fulk shall go all guiltless of such deed though I . . . and he, die for it.”

“Take thee now . . . this ring,” gasped Sir Everard; “it was gift . . . of Fulk and shall win thee . . . instant service of such as . . . do obey him.” So John took the ring but watched this broken man and beholding the violent tremours that shook him and how wildly he stared up at the sinking moon, bent low to catch his painful whispering:

“Oh, friend, I — grow blind — it is the — death me-

thinks. Oh, friend, reach — reach me thy hand — wilt not — leave me?"

"Not I!" answered John, clasping these cold and nerveless fingers. And after some while:

"Oh, man," quoth Sir Everard in strange, loud voice, "the things we strive for in life, in death — show less than nothing — would I — had known! Ah, but now — now — whither go I?"

"To nobler living, I dare to say!" answered John. "For by death we do enter into fuller life or we are mocked."

"Life?" whispered Sir Everard, "Life?" Then he sighed deeply and so — was dead. But John sat there, still clasping this dead hand, gazing upon this pale dead face that stared blindly on the failing moon, awed by this eternal, stupendous mystery of death.

A chill wind was abroad and roused by this, John shivered; then stooping above the dead Sir Everard, folded the mailed arms of him reverently in form of Holy Cross and bowing head, prayed aloud, thus:

"Great God, Father of all Mankind, one of Thy children, lost awhile, now seeketh Thy mercy. Let him by Thee presently find such glory and gladness of life as he hath never known . . . for Jesu's sake and all good things that, dying, live on forever — "

Thus prayed John and was suddenly dumb and still, for his quick and ever-watchful eye had caught a steely glimmer amid the leafage hard by; then out flashed ready sword and he was afoot, poised for swift action, saying:

"Come ye forth!"

The leaves parted and into the fading moonlight stepped the Duchess Ippolita; and thus motionless stood they, and speechless awhile, gazing upon each other above the grim, still form of Sir Everard.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TELLETH OF RAGEFUL TEMPEST

“THOU!” cried John at last, looking round about them.

“And — alone?”

“Yea, I thank Heaven!”

“Where then is Walter and the Five?”

“All vainly seeking me, the poor devoted souls — nay, scowl not nor blame them, for none may hold me ’gainst my will.”

“The which is full manifest!” quoth John ruefully.
“But what dost thou here?”

“Learn me much and wonder at thee, John. I have seen thee by craft of war win a battle with few ’gainst the many; I have watched thee comfort thine enemy; I have heard thee pray. And so is it that I wonder — ”

“Is this indeed so great matter for wonderment, Ippolita? Now of thyself, ’stead of running needless perils thus, so fool-like, shouldst be safe sleeping in thy bed.”

“Sayst thou, most lordly arrogant John? Wouldst command me thereto?”

“Ay, I would. These forests tonight be athrong with roving men, broken companies raging in defeat or fierce with victory and mad with slaughter — ”

“Yet lo, here also is my Jingling John to fight in my defence, to sing or — pray for me . . . to pray as thou didst for this man — ” And speaking, she came where she might look down on the dead Sir Everard, and murmured sighing, “I wonder now where is the so

troubled soul of him . . . or if he be anyways comforted by thy praying?"

"It is so I hope, lady."

"And he thine enemy!"

"That died in his duty, Ippolita!"

"In most evil, ah, full wicked cause, John . . . And by thy hand, quo' he!"

John shivered in sudden, cold-breathing air and glancing overhead, beheld a filmy wrack of scurrying cloud.

"See, yonder breweth storm," said he. "Let us be gone; we shall have tempest of rain and wind ere dawn, I guess."

"Well, and what then?" cried she, tossing wide her mailed arms and looking up and around glad-eyed. "Better fury of tempest 'neath God's wide heaven than to be pent in gloomy walls with creeping Treachery! So let storm rage how it will, I shall not blench therefore . . . And thou, my gloomy John-wretch, art not glad to have me with thee thus? Hast no joy in my companionship?"

"Hardly, lady, hardly."

"What then, most graceless man, wouldst be rid of me?" But instead of making answer, John went on knees to collect his various medicines, setting them very carefully into the wallet, while she watched him 'neath puckered brows, saying:

"In despite all thy arts of leechcraft, this man died!"

"Yet I did my best, lady."

"Oh, wilt be meek now, basely servile?" she jibed. Here John whistled softly to Apollo, who came, chewing, then having secured wallet to saddle, he glanced anxiously up at the sky again.

"So thou art very fain to be rid of me."

"My Lady Ippolita," he answered patiently, "thou art my carking care, so shall I be full troubled man until I bring thee safe into thy city —"

"And God be thanked it is very far hence!" she retorted.

"And so I pray thee, noble lady, let us begone." But now she turned and sank to her knees beside the still form of Sir Everard to sign the cross above him, then folding reverent hands, prayed reverently a while. Opening her eyes suddenly and meeting John's wistful look, she rose, saying:

"An thou, being gross man, wilt pray for thine enemy, I, being a woman nothing gross, may do the like." Then she brought him where her horse stood tethered, but when she would have mounted, John stayed her.

"First unbelt and do off that rich surcoat, lest thy scarlet leopards betray thee."

"Nay, who shall regard them in this wilderness, John?"

"Who shall say, lady. And I pray thee haste ere the light fail."

So together they mounted, but scarce were they out upon the forest road than Ippolita uttered a hushed cry and reined in suddenly, for this broad, leafy way was strewn thick with ghastly battle wrack, the loom of slain horses and glimmering faces of dead men that seemed to stare up at her from the hoof-torn sod or to peep furtive from bent and trampled bracken.

"Ay, verily," sighed John, "here was the pursuit, and when that men flee, Death is ever merciless and smiteth sure."

"Ah, we cannot go this way, John."

"We needs must. Slack your rein, the horses shall pick their way."

Thus went they slowly in silence awhile, until the flying clouds thickened upon the moon, putting out her pale radiance; so came darkness and in this gloom a cold and fitful wind that wailed dismally about them and moaned afar.

"There muttereth storm, lady. Giant Tempest waketh, as I foretold thee."

"Ah, John," quoth she, riding very near him, "I would thou wert not forever so hatefully right."

"Faith now and am I so?"

"And yet meek when I would have thee otherwise, and otherwise when I would have thee meek. Thou'rt more reverently prayerful than any priest! Thou'rt mild, thou'rt maidenly."

John laughed.

"My lady Ippolita, how then wouldst have me?" But ere she might answer, John pulled up suddenly to peer about him.

"Lady, here certes we should turn to the right."

"Nay, here certainly we turn left."

"But to reach Pentavalon we must cross the ford and Shallowford lieth on our right."

"Ay, but Stowe Grange lieth to our left and thither go we! Yea John, to Dame Ursula Stowe that, as yon dying man told, fostered me and is the only mother I ever knew, — my dear wise, much loved Ursula, that I was used to call Melisse and that I see all too seldom, God forgive me, in these days of harassing care. Well, this night I carry her to the security of my citadel."

"But indeed, no cause is there for such dire haste, and tomorrow full early she shall to thee in Pentavalon;

this shall be my first care, but for this night she is safe from all chance of any harm — ”

“And how canst dare be so sure of this?”

“For that Fulk’s men be all scattered and in full flight and himself camped beyond Hartley Furze.”

“Howbeit, I am for Stowe and my loved foster mother. Oh, I heard what said your Sir Everard . . . nor shall my Ursula lie at such vile risk. Now, come you with me, John, or do I ride alone?”

Thus speaking, to the left turned she, and perforce John followed.

“Oh, woman!” quoth he, in groaning voice. “Now God save thee in thy so random folly!”

“Amen, thou prayerful John! Now pray for thine own poor self.”

“God make me able to cope with this Ippolita’s peevish contumacy,” quoth he, whereat the Duchess laughed happily.

“And thanks be to every holy saint,” quoth she, “that I am no poor mere male thing that must bow to thy tyranny and cringe to thy so arrogant will.”

“And yet, lady, but a little while since I was, by thine accounting, all meek humility.”

“So do I prove thee man very changeable and hath more faces than the double-headed Janus.”

“And thou,” he retorted, stooping suddenly to avoid the dim-seen branches of a tree, “art woman that hath lost her way, I guess.”

“Why, ’tis very dark!” sighed she.

“And the forest closeth upon us, Ippolita. Here is no way; let us go back.”

“Nay, push on, Master Faintheart!” she mocked. “I should know my own forests; I have hunted hereabouts many’s the time. Come, follow me.”

So, mid a leafy darkness rode they, forcing a passage through dense underwoods, now low-bent beneath impeding boughs, now turning aside from tangled thickets, until they broke suddenly into a little clearing open to the sky, and here John halted.

"Wait!" said he, glancing up at the fleeting blackness above, whence stars winked fitfully. "Mid yonder cloud rack we shall presently have peep of moon."

"And the wind, John! How it waileth and steals rustling, like some furtive thing to threat us!" And speaking, she rode so near him that knee met knee and then in the darkness came her hand questing his: thus with her fingers close and warm in his vital clasp, they waited for the light and all about them a ceaseless flutter and stir, while afar the woods made desolate outcry to some rising wind gust, with a rustling that seemed to creep ever nearer.

"John," she murmured, "'tis wind maketh strange tumult!"

"Ay, I hear," he answered as softly. "Yonder is more than mere bluster of wind . . . hither come men . . . horses —"

"Oh, art sure?"

"Ay, certes. I have not lived a hunted man for nought. Constant peril sharpeneth the senses, for Nature is ever kindly . . . There, — didst hear?"

"Yea," she whispered, "a horse snorted! And there again was jingle of bridle chain!"

"And at last showeth the moon!" Even as he spoke, the clouds parted and the little clearing was filled with a tender light that showed all things very clearly: tall bracken, the bare, upflung branches of a fallen tree backed by the vast glooming mysteries of the forest beyond. Then into this moony radiance rode four

horsemen who reined to sudden halt, and on the breast of each, plain to see, the black device of the Bear.

"So!" murmured John. "Yonder come beaten hounds and therefore vicious, men that flee and so the more merciless to avenge their shame. Get thee behind me, Ippolita!" he whispered fiercely, for even now, these men having peered and muttered together, drew swords, all four.

"Alas!" sighed the Duchess. "Now would God I had not forgot my sword —"

"Nay, get thee behind me! Back, I say!"

"Not so, my lord and tyrant," she answered, glad-voiced, "this night thy perils shall be mine also!" But now seeing these men about to charge them, John rode suddenly forward, right arm upflung against them, crying fiercely:

"What now, ye whipped dogs of High Morven, ye that serve the Bear, stand all!" And his gesture was so imperious, his mien and voice so scornful and assured, that the four checked their assault as towards them rode these two, with look very bold and arrogant. Reining up within swords sweep of these four, and ere they could make enquiry of him, John questioned them as one having authority over them:

"Ye were of Sir Everard's company?"

"Yea, Messire. But who —"

"Whither ride ye?"

"Sire, we seek our lord Fulk's camp at Thornton Wold, beyond Hartley Furze."

"Will ye so, rashlings. And your goodly array that was to burn Shallowford scattered or slain, the bold Sir Everard dead —"

"Dead, sire, dead! Holy saints! Art sure o' this?"

"He died with his hand in mine; behold his ring and

know the truth on't." Now while they stared on the ring and upon each other in huge dismay, quoth John:

"How then, ye dogs that bark and bite not, how shall ye face the Bear? Flee ye rather to the wildwood and howl; better to live in other service than be rent by the Bear. As for me, I ride north." Here the four nodded one to another.

"A speaketh wisdom!" quoth one.

"Ay, sooth, we shall ha' short shrift for this night's woeful hap."

"Sire, we be men of High Morven bred and born; we rode with Aymery the Earl, ere came the Fitz-Urse. Master, what shall we do now, being lost men all and storm coming on?"

"Quit his service and seek a better; strip off that blazon of the Bear and don instead the leopards of Pelynt . . . live ye henceforth lieges to the Duchess."

"This were well bethought, Messire, but we be broken men all by this night's work and the Duchess Ippolita is lady of might and very high and proud —"

"This I can well believe," quoth John fervently.

"And yet," said the Duchess, "she can be full tender and merciful. So, an ye be masterless men, ride ye to Pentavalon, enquire there for one Simon, and say that John, lord Constable, shall vouch for ye. And so fare ye well."

Now hereupon the four swords, drawn to such very other purpose, were brandished in salute, and with humble, yet emphatic thanks, these lost men, obedient to John's directions, wheeled their horses and were gone.

"And I would we were riding citywards with them!" quoth John; whereat she laughed, soft yet joyous, and urged her horse to faster gait.

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"Truly, Messire John," said she, after they had gone some way in silence, "thou'rt full cunning in manage of thy kind; to turn these fierce men from wolfish enemies to sheepish friends, — this was vastly adroit. Ay, thou'rt well versed in men, but how of women?"

"There be few in the wilderness, Ippolita."

"Well, in thy so far wanderings — how then?"

"I gave myself to other ploys, alas!"

"Oh? And now dost heartily grieve therefore?"

"Right heartily."

"Wherefore?"

"Now, lady, were I full skilled in womankind, I should perchance know something better how to bend thy stiff-necked waywardness, and we be riding for safety, 'stead of deeper into these perilous wilds."

"Couldst ever bend me to thy will, John?"

"Ay, I could indeed, were we — other than we are."

"Oh — a riddle! Well, riddle me this."

"Wert thou indeed the barefoot Lia and I poor, care-free singer o' songs."

"'Stead of which, I am poor Ippolita of Pelynt and thou art my lord High Constable."

"By thy favour, noble lady."

"Well now," quoth she, looking up and around, "where now is the storm foretold of thee? Art false prophet, John; thy Giant Tempest hath gone to sleep again."

"Alack, not so, lady; he doth but gird himself to smite anon."

"Dost remember Stowe?" she questioned suddenly. "And what befell there?"

"No whit, lady."

"Fond wretch, it was there we first beheld each other. It was there didst make me share thy meal and

jingled me how all bodily beauty was but food glorified, and then likened my name to hiccough, to neigh of horse — ”

“Ay, I mind me, now.”

“And vowed thyself no more than poor errant gleeman.”

“Why, so I am in sooth, Ippolita.”

“Go to now, Sir Meek Humility! Could ever such petty man contrive and win battles, outwit subtle villainy and carry off duchesses?”

“A mere one, lady . . . And yonder speaketh the Giant!” said he, as, faint but threatening, came the distant roll and rumble of thunder.

“Oh, Mother of Mercy!” exclaimed the Duchess. “Lightning and thunder I could ever hardly endure but — ” A sudden raging wind gust smote them breathless and was away to work havoc among the screeching trees and smite the reeling forests to rageful tumult. Then came darkness blacker than ever, with vicious hiss of driven rain; lightning flickered afar, flared nearer, thunder pealed . . . And so leapt Giant Tempest with roaring wild halloo. And in this raving clamour a breathless cry:

“John . . . oh, John!”

With hands that clasped and clung, heads bowed against this elemental fury, they struggled on through a rushing blackness filled with whirling leaves and twigs. More than once, loud above roar of wind and beat of rain, rose the sharp, splintering crash of falling tree or riven bough . . . But on rode the young Duchess in defiance of John's pleas and shouted warnings, and he wondered to hear her laugh, and once he thought she even sang. . . . And ever the storm increased on them.

Thus buffeted by merciless wind, lashed by blinding rain, dazzled by flash and flare of lightning, on went they, though whither, or in what direction, anxious John knew not, until at last the leaping tumult subsided, the woods thinned away, while the ground before them trended smoothly downward into a very haven of calm, where they found blessed surcease from this raging fury of wind; and in this comparative quiet they drew rein. Now, looking about as the lightning flared, John saw they were in a deep, bushy dingle.

"Now God be thanked!" said he fervently.

"Amen!" she answered. "For truly God's hand hath led us! After yon buffeting fury, this is like coming home." As she spoke came the lightning to show him her face that, wet and rain-beaten, yet smiled on him, and in her eyes such light of gladness as woke in him a joyous wonder.

"Ha, dear comrade," cried he on impulse, "now blessings on thy valiant soul. Light thee down, for here will I build thee little shelter shall keep thee from the rain."

"Oh, what matter," cried she, "for oh, man, here is truer living than couched twixt sleep and wake in voluptuous bed. . . . And the rain hath stopped."

"Yet bed shalt have, ay, and a fire."

"Nay, but in a world so wet, John."

"Yea, verily, a woodsman shall get him fire whenso he will. Bide thee with the horses and ha' patience."

So John dismounted and went questing along the steepy bank like the skilled forester he was, and presently hailed her cheerily and thereafter brought her where was bush-grown cavity in the steep, wherein was great plenty of dry leaves with twigs and bracken. So here she sat while John, taking flint and steel from the

pouch at his girdle, very soon had a fire crackling merrily to her great comfort and content. Then, having secured the horses and eased their girths, back came he with well-laden saddle-bag from which he took bread and meat with a skin of light wine. Thus side by side in the cheery fire-glow and all heedless now of the tempest that raged above them, they ate and drank with such hearty appetite as forbade all speech awhile. Then, hunger appeased, John set himself to tend the fire and she, leaning back in its drowsy warmth, watched him beneath langourous sweep of lashes; and presently questioned him in soft sleepy tone:

“Thy father and mother, live they yet?”

“No, lady.”

“And thou art, I wit full well, of right noble birth, John.”

At this, he sat staring into the fire so long that she spoke him again and not at all sleepily:

“Oh now, be done with this folly of secrecy! Who art thou verily and what?”

“High Mightiness, I am a homeless man and as thou knowest a banned outlaw — ”

“And so be dumb!” said she angrily. “I had liefer hearken to the wind . . . or forget this weariness in slumber!” And stretching herself more restfully on her leafy couch, she presently seemed to fall asleep indeed.

And after some time John, being very conscious of her nearness, must first peep and peer at her over his shoulder, then turn himself about, then steal him nearer, that he might behold thus her vivid loveliness and warm allure as he had never done ere now; the sweet flowing curves of this womanly form that no manly armour could quite conceal; this face that, despite voluptuous eyes and ruddy, full-lipped mouth, had yet a look of

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such clean youth and high austerity. . . . But as he hung above her thus, drinking in her beauty, these eyes suddenly looked up into his, very bright and wakeful; these vivid lips curved to slow smile as she murmured:

“Well now, Messire Furtive Slyness, what wouldst thou?” But having no answer, he shook his head dumbly and turned back to the fire.

“Why then, John, how thinkest thou of this my poor face, this shape of me?”

“Should be in bed!” he answered. “And would God they were!”

“Now fain am I,” sighed she, “that ’stead of being so proudly born, of such high, chivalrous nobility, thou wert indeed no more than poor rhymers.”

“Why so?”

“Wouldst then perchance prove more human.”

John bowed his head between clenched hands and, staring on the fire, thought of King Tristan’s gallows and of the nine that languished in the dungeon of Fovant . . . And in this same moment started as a harsh voice challenged and, leaping afoot, saw beyond the fire armed men and on shield and surcoat the hated blazon of the Black Bear.

“Hail and fair greeting, Messires!” said John, advancing on these men, right hand upraised in salutation. “Pray now, who is in authority here?”

“Myself,” answered the foremost rider. “I am Gaucelm, Knight of Threep.”

“Then, sire Gaucelm, ye behold two benighted travellers, knights errant out o’ the West. Pray ye, where are we now?”

“This is Thaxton Wold and yonder, half a bowshot, is the camp of Fulk Fitz-Urse. Ay, yonder croucheth the Bear . . . But ye, now,” said their questioner,

bending from saddle with quick eagerness, "heard ye aught tonight as ye came, saw ye aught of the raid on Shallowford?"

"Ay, somewhat," answered John. "I've word or so for Fulk his ear."

"Why then, how sped the business? Shallowford should be ablaze long time since; we have watched and yet seen never so much as spark, and wherefore?"

"Messire," answered John, "when I have spoken Fulk, he shall tell ye an he so will."

"Then mount and come ye forthright, and for your own sakes, speak him fair."

"This is as must be!" quoth John, tightening girths and bridles. "But of your grace, sir knight, know you if the lord Julian of Weare came safe hither this night?"

"Ay, he did, sire," answered Sir Gaucelm, with grim smile, "and in parlous case, most sorry plight, inso-much he lieth in my pavilion even now, very woeful."

Now at this, John's brow grew dark and he glanced on the Duchess anxious-eyed as they got them to saddle.

They climbed a grassy slope to be met by blusterous wind and see before them a vague and rolling heath, dim lit by the blown sparks of many sheltered watch-fires; and hereabouts John's eyes were quick to heed all they might, the soldiers' rough hutments, the tents and pavilions of lords and knights, but most especially he looked where stood the long lines of tethered horses.

Here, at word from Sir Gaucelm, they dismounted and, side by side, followed whither they were led.

CHAPTER XXIX

HOW THEY HAD WORD WITH FULK FITZ-URSE

BENEATH a grove of swaying trees somewhat remote from the camp, in rain-sodden tent reinforced against the wind by twisted osiers, Fulk Roger Fitz-Urse was at his supper; a great bulk of a man who ate voraciously by dim light of a glimmering rush. His mail coif, back-thrown on mighty shoulders, showed him thick-jowled, heavy-lipped and swarthy; from wide-set, well-opened eyes to broad and lofty brow, he showed all good; from jutting nose, with its cruel lift of nostril, to fleshy chin he was all gross evil.

He glanced at John, stared hard on the Duchess, chewed, swallowed, drank and spoke in voice richly deep and unexpectedly mild.

“Who now are ye and whence come?”

“I am John of Beckton in the West, and this my esquire.”

“Why, ’tis comely youth; let him approach.”

“And I bring ye black news, lord Fulk,” said John, stepping betwixt Fulk’s wide stare and the Duchess. “News of death and havoc.”

“This I expected. But then why flames not Shallowford? I ha’ looked for ’t in vain.”

“And shall, lord Fulk, God wot. Shallowford burneth not since thy men be all slain or scattered.”

“Ah — so?” quoth Fitz-Urse, fingering his heavy chin. “Now pray thee, right knowledgeable knight, how know ye this?”

“By witness of these my eyes and ears.”

"Ah? And how chanced this?"

"The valiant Duchess Ippolita had warning, I guess, and smote thy companies at the ford; so are her people nowise harmed and the village secure."

"Why now," murmured Fulk, showing his teeth in dreadful smile, "hast a full bold tongue for such news! The village burns not, thou sayeth; my lusty men, five hundred and more, return not, for that they may not, being all scattered or dead, thou sayeth! Well, sire knight, for such tidings, so told, how must I guerdon thee?"

"With bait for our horses and fair Godspeed, my lord."

"Ah? Go would ye and be quit o' me so soon? Not so. I like well this comely esquire o' thine; 'tis shapely and youthful. For thyself, I might slit me thy nimble tongue for speaking that I would not hear, or blind those eyes for seeing that they should not, or crop thine ears and so, hang and be done with thee. Good knight of Beckton, how sayst thou?"

"Bid thee wait, Fulk, until I have told thee the worst."

"What then, ill-omened caitiff, is there worse yet?"

"Open those ears and judge thou, lord Fulk! Hear now that beside thy so many men, died also thy right faithful, loving friend Sir Everard de Rusper, in proof whereof — this!" And upon the table beside the feeble rushlight, John bestowed the ring. Fulk looked at it, touched it with hairy finger, shook massive head over it and spoke:

"So my Everard is dead and, beyond all doubting damned, alas! The which sore grieveth me, for I loved the man."

"Then, my lord Fulk, temper thy so passionate grief,

stint thy tears nor weep, for I dare to say though his body be dead indeed, his soul is neither dead nor damned."

"Yet was he very notorious and determined sinner; yea, most pertinacious —"

"And yet, lord, in his dying, and despite mortal anguish, his final words and thoughts were all for thyself."

"Well," sighed Fulk, "here is none great matter for to wonder upon. I was his right good friend; moreover I — am Fulk! Fitz-Urse the Bear, I — that no thing on four legs or two shall bait unharmed. Thus now upon my heart swear I that for every life reft from me this night — four will I take whenso I am lord and master of Pelynt! Yea, forsooth, and for my Everard's dying, — twenty men will I hang in Pentavalon from that tower they call Wrykyn."

"Yet lo, Fulk, here am I, according to promise made to Sir Everard in his death hour; here stand I for to woo thee to thine own salvation. To plead with thee, Fulk, to put from thee such bloody thought and certain other black deed, lately purposed, that ye wot of —"

"Ha, thou dog, wilt yap — and to my face?"

"Not I, Fulk, not I! Think rather it is thy good friend Sir Everard speaking through these my lips. 'Hold thee, Fulk!' saith he, 'Turn aside from such vile iniquity, that whenso Death smite thee, as sure he will soon or late, thy poor maimed soul may limp to God's judgment the less burdened. Have mercy on thyself, Fulk, that thy poor soul may somewhen — peradventure — win its sorry way to Paradise. Go guiltless henceforth for thine own sake and sake of the dead Everard that was, ay, and is yet, thy friend.'"

Fulk Fitz-Urse stared, smiled, laughed throatily and reaching silver goblet, tossed its dregs into John's face, saying:

"Shouldst be pious shaveling in monkish gown, 'stead of knightly hauberk —" Here of a sudden was hurry of approaching feet and a voice that shouted:

"Fulk — ho, Fulk!" But in this same instant John, well knowing this voice, smote out the light, seized Ippolita's hand fast and began to run; and so came full upon one who, peering on them, shouted amain and went down headlong before John's powerful fist.

With Fulk's bellowing roars scarce to be heard in howling wind, they reached the horses and Ippolita, leaping to saddle, began to fume and fret that John must go running here and there, busied with she knew not what, and she reproaching, pleading, crying his name loudly as she dared; so came he at last, leaving tumult behind . . . terrified horses that kicked and reared, whinnied and screamed, then broke, to gallop wildly in all directions, waking the camp to sudden uproar and a confused clamour that grew to panic.

"Spur!" cried John, and they were off at plunging gallop, keeping to the open wind-swept heath that they might go the more speedily; yet even so, upon the air rose clamour of shouts and sound of desperate pursuit; and then a voice faint yet clear that cried:

"Ippolita!"

"Ah, God!" wailed the Duchess. "He knew me . . . in this dark and . . . spite this armour, for . . . there cried Julian!"

"Spur then!" cried John twixt shut teeth.

Headlong rode they through a tempestuous darkness on and on at such speed that John must needs

check his fleet Apollo lest he outpace Ippolita's willing steed; thus soon the open heath was behind them and before, blacker than this glooming night, the wind-smitten forest roared at them.

"Check," cried John, "check and beware now, Ippolita, lest these woods . . . prove our deaths —"

"Nay . . . our salvation!" cried she, "I know this country now . . . follow me!"

Neck and neck they rode, seeking an opening in this dim, dense leafage while borne to them high and clear, but louder now, came that pursuing cry:

"Ippolita!"

Then they were in the forest, a broad glade where they might spur with loose rein.

"'Tis road, John . . . I had cut . . . for hunting . . . that few do wot of —"

"Yet of these few . . . the lord of Weare . . . hear him!" cried John, as behind them again rose the dread clamour of the hue and cry with that high-pitched, mocking voice:

"Ippolita!"

And even as this cry rang down the wind, John heard his companion's distressful wail:

"John . . . oh, John, my horse . . . is lamed! Here is . . . end —"

"Not yet!" quoth he and, reining hard beside her foundered animal, he clasped and swung her before him, then touched Apollo with spur, whereat this proud-spirited creature leapt responsive, gathered mighty limbs and set off at his fleetest, snorting in rapture of such freedom; whereat Ippolita cried out for wonder and must needs cling John fast about to steady herself.

Thus sped this steed Apollo in long tireless stride

as proud to vaunt the matchless strength of his gaunt, unlovely body, — bearing these twain as they had indeed been one, spurning the earth with contemptuous hoofs until, in place where two ways met, he trod awry, checked, and went down. . . .

Dazed and breathless, John got upon his legs to find Ippolita beside him, to feel his hand seized and himself dragged to stumbling run and in his ears again that mocking shout:

“Ippolita!”

But now, his brain clearing, he was aware how she gasped and yet spake him bravely as they ran.

“Beside this stream . . . an old tower . . . not far . . . and they shall not . . . find us . . . pray God. . . .”

Presently as they sped, the black darkness became a gloom lightening to a soft and tender twilight and, looking up, John saw the clouds were all blown clean away and in their stead a great glory of stars.

“There!” gasped Ippolita joyfully. “Oh, sweet Mary — of Mercy be — thanked! . . . The tower, John . . . yonder! I . . . have brought thee . . . right!”

Behind them was thunderous trample of galloping hoofs, shouts, clash of menacing steel, but — before them rose the vague loom of the tower and, drawing nearer, John breathed a wordless prayer of gratitude to see the doorway so deep and narrow. Breathless and well-nigh spent, they gained this refuge and in the strait doorway John halted and unsheathed his long sword, and leaned against the massive wall to fetch his breath and brace himself for desperate conflict. And watching, he saw these oncoming pursuers, having far outstripped their fellows, were no more than three and foremost of them — lord Julian of Weare; more-

over, no one of them bore lance, — for all of the which John breathed yet another prayer of gratitude, while behind him in the gloom the Duchess strove vainly to rear the heavy ladder to an open trap door in a corner that gave on the chamber above.

On came the pursuers, shouting exultant and brandishing their swords, while John watched them and balancing heavy weapon in right hand, drew dagger with his left, then crossed himself devoutly and waited their onset, smiling very grimly. And first to assail him was the lord Julian; fiercely he came and lustily he smote but steel met steel and hampered by his horse he wheeled aside. Meanwhile his companions had dismounted and thus afoot together came at John amain; but ere they closed with him, John launched his dagger and, smitten in full career by this flying, flickering steel, one of these two cried out and fell; then leapt John with ready sword that parried, that smote, that leapt in full-armed thrust and, clawing at riven hauberk, his second assailant staggered aside and went down.

Now lord Julian, yet astride his horse, spurred again to the encounter, and John, very eager he should by no means escape, sprang to meet him, with bloody sword aloft and as they neared each other, eye glared to eye; but scarce were they in reach than lord Julian reined up suddenly and swerved, but, even then, John, leaping, smote. . . . The sword fell from lord Julian's nerveless grasp, he swayed violently, righted himself with an effort and abiding no more, spurred to furious gallop and was away.

But even now, as John stood breathless and very woeful to see him go, upon his shoulder came Ippolita's hand and in his ear her voice very sweetly jubilant.

"Oh, valiant Achilles, bold Hector, my wise Ulysses, wherefore gloom and glower?"

"Ah, Ippolita . . . lady," he sighed. "Lo, now I have let 'scape me the lord Julian! Yonder he rideth to bring Fulk hither and so . . . death mayhap —"

"Why then, let us flee hence."

"Ay, but — whither? In a little while it will be day and these woods all about us alive with Fulk's men to hunt us down, for thou . . . thou art the end of all his striving, the very crown of his ambition."

"Fitz-Urse!" cried she fiercely and yet shivered. "Rather will I die! And yet . . . oh, John, never leapt in me life so sweet, so strong as now! Never have I felt such lust to live, or this world seemed to me so fair . . . Ah, look, yonder breaks the day, coming in glory . . . this day that shall most like be our last . . . Oh, John!"

The wind had died away and over all things was a deep hush, a stilly air sweet with scent of clean earth. Beyond the glooming woods was beam of light, a growing radiance; upon the brooding silence rose the sleepy note of a waking bird . . . a drowsy twittering that, as the light increased, swelled to joyful chorus; then up came the sun, shooting his beams athwart the mighty forest, filling the leafy aisles with a splendour where the birds, these myriad harbingers of day, piped him their shrill glad welcome. But all at once on this pretty babblement broke a harsh shouting, faint with distance yet very evil to hear.

"Oh!" sighed the Duchess. "Come they now . . . and so soon? Well, let us live whiles we may, and if Death take me, I'll be resolute as thyself, John." Then she stooped and took up lord Julian's sword whence it lay

and with this grasped in her right hand, reached John her left, saying:

“Come now, we will make this old tower of Wydioc our deliverance or our tomb . . . nay, look not so grievous; if I must die this day, I shall be less fearful with thee beside me. . . .”

Now, speaking, she smiled, and before the glory in her eyes he abased his own and thus, beholding the slim hand that clasped his so firmly, he stooped suddenly to kiss and kiss it with burning lips, in fashion nowise meek or courtly.

Then hand in hand they entered this old tower of Wydioc that was to be their defence and hope of life, and in the eyes of each a light not of the sun.

CHAPTER XXX

TELLETH HOW IN WYDIOC TOWER THEY WAITED DEATH

IT was a small chamber roofed and floored with stone and but one narrow opening in its massive walls; wherefore John's gloom and dread anxiety lifted somewhat and he looked up and about them with kindling eye.

"Now, God be thanked!" quoth he. "For verily two resolute men might hold this 'gainst an army until they died . . . of starvation."

"Then now shall one man, John, and one woman."

"Nor could I ask comrade more valiant, Ippolita. But to fight well, so must we eat, and Apollo beareth the wherewithal; therefore will I go seek him."

"Nay, but where he fell was far hence and he may be dead or maimed."

"Also nearer than we wot of, comrade. Bide thee here —"

"Nay, I'll with thee indeed." So down went they together and out into fragrant world all green and gold and with a pearly mist, a moving opalescence that thinned away before the sun's increasing warmth. Now when he had recovered and cleaned his dagger in the good earth, John set fingers to lip and whistled amain and as they stood to listen:

"Oh, John," she murmured, "what fair sweet world . . . more lovely than it ever seemed ere now! God send we may know and love it yet a little while . . . Hark, something stirs in the thickets yonder."

John called and presently out from the underbrush

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thrust Apollo's great head, ears cocked, his one eye serenely bright, his jaws busy as ever, and chewing thus, he ambled to them. Then while John loosed from him saddlebag, mantle and wallet of medicines, the Duchess stroked and fondled his unlovely head, saying:

"Certes, it is noble creature, thy Apollo, and so wondrous wise he should be called Solon."

"Then here's shall prove an he truly merit such praise," said John, and from among his precious medicines took pen, inkhorn and strip of parchment, whereon he inscribed this message both in the courtly Norman French and good Saxon English:

"Aid us at Wydioc Tower beyond Thaxton Wold.
Haste ye. John.

Bear ye help right speedily."

Folding this script, he set it beneath the saddle girth, saying:

"This, for such as can read. And now for the many that may not." And questing among the trees, presently he came back with sprigs of oak, ash and thorn twisted together, the which he set with the writing. "Here," quoth he, "is message plain for to read by any of the Green Brotherhood . . . a plea for help from one to the many." Then he set Apollo's head to the forest, clapped him on mighty crupper and bade him away.

Apollo rolled his one eye at them, snorted, switched his rattail, ambled leisurely into the denser forest and was gone.

Then John fell speedily to work, for catching up his burdens he bore them aloft and there, chancing

upon an old battered earthen crock, set the Duchess to wash and fill it with water from the brook, while he cut and gathered great store of bracken; and thus they laboured together until Ippolita, throwing up stately head like (thought John) any graceful, startled fawn, cried him hush.

"Hark!" she exclaimed. "They come at last . . . and a great company."

"Ay, I hear them, comrade!" quoth John cheerily. "So up with thee now."

Then, gathering a last armful of fern, he followed her up into their refuge. Here, and with her eager, tremulous hands to aid him their best, he hove up the heavy ladder and closing the trap door, bade her to be glad for its stout timbering, and smiled into her wide anxious eyes so joyfully that she smiled also and, at his direction, helped him to further strengthen and secure it; in the midst of which business she called him to see where lay great pieces of a broken millstone which they together and with great labour contrived to set over and upon the narrow trap door. This achieved, John doffed his steel headpiece, tossed back mail coif and leather hood to mop at moist brow while she, sinking down on the great pile of bracken, thrilled with amaze to see John all strangely transfigured; eyes that laughed in the comely oval of a face framed in crisp curls of night-black hair; a mouth, no longer grim, upcurving in youthful smile; a young, comely man, who stretched wide his mailed arms and with shining eyes uplift to the small window that framed a glory of sun, spake glad-voiced:

"Ippolita, here we be at last, thou and I, alone with God! To live or die as He willeth. Thus, no more need for us all anxious scheming, careful contrivance, the

ceaseless watching to outwit circumstance and fore-leap pouncing, sudden dangers — this, all this I may now cast by and so be rid on. And oh, the wondrous easement! For, seest thou, being now in the very hand of God, I am no longer one that must forever seek to guide events, but merest man to smite my best and abide the issue with a serene mind.”

“Yea, John, but — if this be death?”

“Death shall be kind friend to resolve me all my difficulties, in especial one; to set for me all portals wide at last and remit all debts — ”

“Yea, yea, thou selfish John, but now, forgetting John awhile, what of this poor Ippolita?”

“She is Pelynt and so, the very apple of Fulk’s eye; death shall not touch her therefore — ”

“Oh, base!” cried she, in sudden anger. “Now shame on thee to think me so vile I would ever yield me living to Fulk’s lewd arms! Oh, abomination! Now do I hate thee for daring so to think!” Speaking thus, she was afoot and, ere he knew or might stay her, had snatched the dagger from his belt. “See — thou John-wretch — an death take thee, I will not live Fulk’s captive!”

Then John laughed more blithe than she had ever heard and caught her by both elbows and swung her lightly aloft and seated her again upon the ferny couch, and kneeling, took her hand to shake and hold it fast, as it had been a man’s hand, saying joyfully:

“Now God love thee, my comrade! Here are we nor man nor woman, but comrades twain to front an army undismayed, to live by and for each other so long as we may, striving our best, and — if needs must, together meet Death all unfearing. So do I hail thee now as loved friend and stout brother in arms.”

"Howbeit," said she, viewing him askance, "yet hath God formed me . . . woman!"

"Yet this will I now forget."

"Sayst thou!" she murmured, all sudden tender. "Shall this be anyways possible?"

Now, John not answering, she laughed shyly, yet leaned to him, breast to breast, saying:

"Shall this indeed prove so easy?"

"Not, so," he answered. "God knoweth . . . except thou aid —"

"Oh, John!" she sighed. "Thou dear fool!" And set her arm about his neck and bowed her head against his breast. "Thine eyes be ever so very quick to see," she murmured; "well let them not be blind now . . . Here, with Death creeping on us, suffer them to see . . . all that they will. . . . Here shall be full quit-tance for all thy so great care —" But even as his yearning arms rose to clasp her, she started and John leapt afoot, for, unheeded till now, all about them was dire and menacing clamour, a growing hubbub riven by sudden, bellowing shout:

"Ippolita! Ho, there, shy vixen, hast gone to earth? Wilt come forth now or must I needs dig thee out? Ha, noble lady! Fair Pelynt! Proud Duchess, thy lord, thy master, waiteth thee! Forth then and greet thy Fulk, thy spouse! Hither, wife that is to be; come, I say, let us kiss and grow sweetly acquaint."

Here ensued a silence except for the never-ceasing hum and stir, near and far, that told these two listeners of a great company, so that the young Duchess grew pale and trembled, for all her prideful resolution, and reached her hand to the man beside her and, feeling his clasp so firm and strong, seeing his comely face so untroubled, felt her heart swell responsive with

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a new courage; nor did she blench when rose again Fulk's voice, loud in imperious summons:

"Come, my lady of Pelynt, I'll grant terms, to wit; now heed me! Yield thyself forthright, thou and thy Duchy to my lordship, and the knight John, now with thee, shall all scathless go, and this on my sworn word. But defy me and ha, Ippolita, by my soul, ye shall watch him die by slow torment. Speak thou and pronounce his doom."

"Oh, John," she whispered, "how — how shall I answer. What must I say?"

"Never a word!" he murmured, smiling down into her troubled eyes. "What is to be, will be, maugre Fulk and all his powers."

So was silence growing ever more irksome and hard to endure, wherein many unseen ears were hearkening impatiently for answer or least sound of these fugitives, until at last came harsh babel of voices and Fulk's loudest, fiercest of any.

"Fell me saplings for ladders. Meanwhile, Gurth, thou'rt nimble rogue; up to yon peephole and see if they be there indeed." At this, Ippolita touched John's sheathed sword.

"Nay," he whispered; "how shall death of this one poor knave avail us? Come!"

So he brought her where no eye peering in through the little window could espy them; then presently they heard the man Gurth, hard by, call out:

"Noble master, there be never a soul to see aloft here."

"Why then Rolf, Cnut, yon trap door; essay it together with your lances. What, is't fast? So then we have our quarry secure. Ho, there good fellows, speed ye with the ladders and see they be strong!"

Now while these ladders were making, by Fulk's command divers of his men brought a stout log wherewith to batter and force the trap door; but this log was unwieldly and, smiting thus upward, its blows were but feeble.

Very soon the ladders were ready, and mounting they assailed with shearing axe and thunderous hammer blows, but the stout oak, weighted and reinforced by the heavy millstone, yielding not, defied all their fury awhile; and hereby sat watchful John, cross-legged at his ease, waiting serenely patient until such time as their tireless assailants should hew these massive timbers asunder and thus make him a breach, whereby his ready sword should check their hot fury with down-thrusting point or smiting edge. Meantime others of their antagonists climbed to the little window but seeing none to harm, could but roar threats and speed arrows, now and then, that smote and brake upon the opposite wall.

Thus dragged the slow hours for these two doomed ones who, sitting side by side and very near, while Death thus roared for them, could yet smile on each other, because of this close fellowship, while they talked, despite the ceaseless din, comforting each other; thus:

IPPOLITA: John, dost verily believe that Death, like kind angel, shall ope for us a gateway to greater living, or didst say this but to comfort the dying Sir Everard?

JOHN: (*He turns to look deep into the troubled beauty of her wide eyes.*) Indeed and indeed, it is truth of the which I am persuaded. It is my sure hope that through Death we each one of us shall come to better life. This I must believe, or doubt God His

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justice, for except it to be so, this sorry earthly life, with all its seeming injustices, its needless suffering and woeful travail, this — all this were cruellest mockery else. For all mankind, yea, good and evil, is a life may never perish quite.

IPPOLITA: (*In tone of woeful yearning.*) Life . . . oh, Life! (*She stares up and round about them wide-eyed and the clamour of attack very loud, she shivers violently and crouches nearer, so that John instinctive clasps his arm about her and nestling herself in its strength and comfort, she speaks less distressfully.*) We are now so greatly alive, thou and I, and yet . . . ah, John . . . in but a little time these bodies we so cherish may be . . . things to shudder from —

JOHN: (*His arm tightening upon her until it is almost pain, yet she glad therefore.*) Nay, Ippolita, here's sweeter thought, — that this flesh, being of the earth, shall to earth return and find lovely shape again in sweet herb, or tree, or tender flower. . . . This . . . oh, this body o' thine, so rarely sweet and fair, must again to sweetness turn, and . . . bloom once more . . . Herein, I dare to say, is some mede of comfort?

IPPOLITA: Yea, John, yea, indeed, for I have ever loved trees and flowers.

Through the little window the kindly sun poured himself in glory; and as the time passed, they watched his bright beam creep and creep, across stone floor and up the wall, very slow and yet very sure; and when she had watched its slow, remorseless passage some while she sighed:

“So steal our lives away, for with the night we die. So, John, with our lives yon beam doth bear our very

souls away . . . ah, but whither, whither and to what undreamed purpose?"

JOHN: To greater achievements, mightier doing and so at last to triumph of perfection —

IPPOLITA: Ah, but shall we be together, John . . . always together?

JOHN: (*Fervently*) Forever and forever, I now pray God. Yea . . . together! So is my mind serene to meet what shall be.

IPPOLITA: Oh, John, now do I bless God for thee . . . thou'rt such man beyond my understanding and yet again so strangely simple! Sure there is none like to thee.

JOHN: (*Speaking on hot impulse*) And sure there is no woman in all this great world to match with thyself . . . for oh, God knows I do so . . . thou'rt such . . . (*he stammers and is silent*).

IPPOLITA: (*Shaking him in eager, urgent hands*) Yea, John, yea? Oh, why wilt be so foolish dumb? Speak, man, like man, and tell me what . . . yea, all I am to thee.

JOHN: (*Sighing and shaking his head very woefully*) Nought may I tell thee save this, — that I am bound by such evil destiny I must needs be dumb or hold myself dishonoured all —

IPPOLITA: And wherefore? Speak, ah, speak, I do command thee.

JOHN: Should we by some miracle win hence alive, I must soon to that I would not think on. And so, I pray thee, no more —

IPPOLITA: Yea, but I would have more. Oh, silly man, speak forth that thine eyes have been telling me so very plain and oft of late.

But shaking woeful head, he turned from her to

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watch the trap door that shivered and quaked, now and then, to the thunderous blows that battered it; while she watched him beneath wrinkling brows yet with eyes ineffably gentle. At last said she, and sighing also:

“What now is your thought, I pray you?”

“I think,” he answered, still watching the door, “I think, good comrade, it is time to eat.”

Frowning, she arose and yet, meekly obedient, brought and set out their simple meal; so they ate together but silent now for the most part. . . .

Came evening and ever this ceaseless thunder upon the riven door, whereby now John stood serenely patient as ever, yet poised for deadly action, watching the gleam and glitter of axeheads hewing them passage through the shattering timber; but though the splintered oak gave at last, the barricade of stone yet withstood all efforts. And now at last John's long sword was out and at its deadly work, for plied by his strong unerring hand its quick-darting point wrought such red havoc on their assailants that instead of thunderous blows was the more awful sound of gasping cries and screams suddenly checked with groans of anguish.

They assailed him with lances upthrusting through the breach, with hurtling bolt and whizzing arrow till, finding him out of reach, they remounted the spattered ladder and came on and up again, with axe and sword that yet nothing availed them; for, cumbered upon the crowded, swaying ladder, John's tireless blade thrust or smote them headlong. Therefore at last Fulk called off the assault and by his command, men gathered brushwood, and piling it in the lower chamber set a fire going, but the wood being damp burned badly with much smoke; to counter the which, John wetted his

thick cloak and weighted it down athward the riven trap door, lest the thick smoke and fume should choke them. And even yet they stood secure, for fire availed not against these mighty walls and massive stone flooring. So laying by his notched and bloody sword, down sat John to take fullest advantage of such blessed respite; and beside him Ippolita who, taking this right hand of his had defended her so well, drew it about herself and thus sat they awhile very still and silent, but in a sweet communion that forewent all words; now thrilling to this contact and all her soft allurements, John watched the shadows deepen about them and thinking only of her, yearning for her with his every breath, spoke her lightly as he might:

"Now blessings on whoso builded this stout Tower of Wydioc!"

"Amen!" she murmured. "But see . . . our sunbeam creepeth away from us . . . alas, it is almost gone. Soon will be darkness . . . and then . . . what?"

"Light, I hope and do verily believe."

"Tell me, John, nor fear to be plain, what chances have we of living through this night? Speak me thy secret heart."

"Why, as I see it, comrade, there be chances three, to wit: First, if Apollo be not slain, for no stranger may gentle or ride him, he may win safe to Pentavalon or Brackley Thorn, and so bring help. Second, — somewhere twixt here and Shallowford my three trusty comrades be searching for me; now if they have spied the smoke of Fulk's fire, they shall come on amain. Third, — Jenkyn and the outlaws must home this way to camp, — if they bide not to pillage the dead. These be our chances and all do hang upon 'if' which is small

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word to bear so much . . . and in my heart all hope of rescue is sorely minished, truth to tell."

"Why then, John, let us now tell each other truths that are yet well-nigh beyond all telling. And because thou'rt of such finical honour, or so humbly fearful of poor me, despite my womanhood . . . and because of it . . . oh, John, I do so love thee."

"And I thee," he answered reverently, "soul and body forever!"

"Thus do I know thee for my own lord, yea, and master of me, John, since all that I am is thine . . . and hath been, as I think, since first we met, though I knew not this till late —"

Then she sighed to the passion of his arms that clasped her against his heart, and looking up, saw in his radiant face all she had so desired; insomuch that she murmured, softly plaintive:

"Alas now, for this so hateful mannish guise! Yet will I seem for thee in this last hour all the woman I may!" And putting back her coif of mail, she loosed down her lustrous hair and spread it about him, drawing him down and down until, veiled in its splendour, their lips met and clung. Nor recked they now or stirred for the sudden wild clamours that raved about them, only they held each other the closer, while evening deepened to night.

"Hearken!" she whispered. "They muster for the last assault! Well, let come now what will, nought shall affright me. Here upon thy dear, valiant heart, close in the comfort of thine arms, here will I die. . . . Thus shall Death take us and we together leap hence to deeper, sweeter life."

The wild and dreadful uproar waxed louder; the shadows deepened . . . in the Duchess Ippolita's white

hand the ready steel gleamed, and John, groaning in the extremity of his despair, pressed his lips to the white loveliness she had bared for the stroke that should deliver her.

“Now comfort thee, my beloved!” she murmured, kissing his haggard eyes, “I do but go where, if God be kind, shall be for us that joy we now may but dream on — ”

Above the ceaseless clamour and tumult rose a single voice that cried on them. . . . John's sudden hand plucked the dagger from her grasp . . . heavy feet upon the ladder, mighty shoulders that bowed, heaved and thrust the stone barricade asunder . . . a battered helmet, a grim blood-spattered face split asunder (as it were) by sudden, joyous, white-toothed smile . . . the face of mighty Wat.

CHAPTER XXXI

TELLETH HOW THEY PLEDGED THEM TO A QUEST

NIGHT, with weary men sprawled about a solitary campfire, tending their own and each other's hurts; men who groaned but seldom spake, listening to a faint confused uproar that told of desperate battle afar. But here beside the old Tower of Wydioc, its battered walls rosy in the fire glow, here where of late the conflict had raged so fiercely, all now was hushed and still, save for the dismal wailing of the stricken where one, stripped of his knightly armour, went to and fro, doing what he might to their easement and comfort, a silent, busy man direly bespattered. Presently was gallop of horse hoofs and Walter reined up at the fire and glancing askance at these shapes of misery, flourished dimmed sword at this busy man, crying:

"Ho, John, ho, John — and ye good friends all. The leopards of Pelynt harry the Bear yonder! 'Tis good night to Fulk, forever farewell to Fitz-Urse!"

"Aye, by Cock!" growled Jenkyn, tightening bloody clout upon his brawny leg. "The Bear may growl and none heed, I trow, for we ha' broke his claws, ay, and drawn his teeth b' this night's work!"

"True . . . enow!" gasped Tomalyn faintly, watching John's deft fingers close and bind the gaping wound in his arm that had drained his strength. "Yet . . . alack, nigh all my . . . stout lads do lie stark yonder."

"Yet was it right sweet affray!" said young lord

Raymond, wincing to the smart of his own new-bound hurt.

"And, moreover," quoth Jenkyn, "our Brethren o' the Green, gent sir, have come by marvellous rich booty."

"Though Fitz-Urse 'scaped in the rout!" sighed a dolorous voice and Thurstan dismounted wearily from blown horse.

"Yea, Fulk lives!" growled Wat, scowling down from his saddle. "Twice came I in sword sweep of him and twice the battle parted us, with a wanion, and so Fulk liveth!"

"To die anon by hand of the De Benyon!" said Walter, "Old Guttler here sitteth light in his scabbard and —"

"So cry baa, thou lambish bleater!" growled Wat.

"In thy teeth, Jobbernowl!" cried Walter. "Thou doodleprat, thou rantipole —"

"Nay, but," saith John, yet busied with Tomalyn's hurt, "ye talk amain and yet tell me nought. How came this sudden onfall so timely? Whose the strategy that out-manœuvred Fulk? For to me that waited death, this seems very miracle."

"And yet," answered Walter, rising for better oration and frowning on scowling Wat, "lo, brother John, the explication of this seeming miracle is — De Benyon —"

"Ha, thou bag o' wind!" snarled Wat.

"Nay, I pray now let him speak," said John, still bowed to his labours.

"This day," quoth Walter, "towards sunset, as I rode the forest ways, questing our gracious Duchess with extremest diligence —"

"Having first lost her!" growled Wat.

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“At such time, brother John, I met with my poor Watkyn, and him a lost man foredone, steedless and woeful, who points me where, ’bove the leafage afar, a thick smoke climbed to heaven, and tells me how that he, by stealth o’ woodcraft, hath crept near and seen Fulk’s array close about a lonely tower, and learned how yourself and the Duchess lay pent and besieged full direly. Whereupon I, staying for no more, spurred amain for Pentavalon and thither betimes coming, cried Sir Richard my lord Seneschal to instant action, and presently forth marched we in force to thy relief, chivalry and foot with all the levied might of Pelynt —”

“As for me,” quoth Wat, cutting short his comrade’s oratory, “I met thy horse Apollo, and so mounted, sought and found Jenkyn and our brotherhood, joined forces with Sir Richard on the Forest Road and, knowing Fulk’s posture, we so ordered our battle as to smite in on both flanks. So all’s told.”

“And never,” cried lord Raymond, “never was victory more complete, for when they broke, Sir Richard swung our left battle twixt them and High Morven, whiles Gui of Brandonmere holds them close in chase even now, and there with him should be I, but that my horse was killed and I helpless till came Tomalyn to my relief.”

“Howbeit,” said John, busied now to loose the ill-set clout from Jenkyn’s leg and despite his protestations, “howbeit, Fulk yet liveth and, being Fulk, shall soon or late grow strong again for further mischiefs.” He stopped as from the distance came lusty cheering, with shouts of fierce triumph: then was jingle of arms with trampling of a great company and into this broad clearing rode many lords and knights of Pelynt, escort-

ing a horse litter; beholding which, up sprang lord Raymond and such as were able, as forth of this litter stepped the Duchess Ippolita. Pale was she and heavy-eyed with lack of sleep, yet these eyes sought out and looked only at John who, having risen to make his reverence, was kneeling to tend Jenkyn's leg where he stood.

"Raymond of Fordham," said she, and glanced now from this young Earl in splendour of arms and blazoned surcoat to the humble-seeming man who knelt to serve his fellow man, heedless of all save the work his deft hands wrought, "my lord Raymond, for past injustice and faithful service, I now bestow on you the Manor and demesne of Weare. . . . Speak me no thanks but rather hie you to Pentavalon where is one, I guess, shall greet you well. . . . Jenkyn, thou that wert man outcast, shalt be no longer outlaw but my man. Say to thy fellows of the Forest Brotherhood that from them one and all I do lift the ban of outlawry and bid them to my Duchy of Pelynt, where they shall find good welcome, to live freemen every one and my lieges henceforth. . . . As for thee . . . John —" the clear voice faltered, "how . . . oh, how may I reward thee? I have told these, my lords of Pelynt, how but for thee I were now dead and they to mourn their Duchess. . . . And so, John of the Green, how shall I requite thy valiant service? What dost ask, what wouldst have of me?"

"Thy kindest thoughts, noble lady."

"These be thine already, John —"

"Then am I well content."

"Nay, but this shall not be!" said the Duchess imperiously: then, drawing nearer, she spake him quick and beneath her breath, "Oh, my John, be not yet so humble! All that I am is thine forever, so now I pray

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thee speak. . . . Oh, John, shame not my heart but speak now!"

"My lady Ippolita," he answered that all might hear, "that I would ask is so beyond all my service I dare but speak it when I shall stand for judgment before thy council. But now, by your gracious leave, I will say no more. And so for a while, farewell."

"Nay, but your horse Apollo is yonder; ride with me hence and rest you."

"By your kind sufferance, I'll bide here this night; there be many men sore smitten and —"

"But canst not minister to all, foolish John."

"Alas, no, my salve is well-nigh gone; yet can I do somewhat."

"All these shall be cared for, yea, every one. . . . But thou'rt so pale!" she murmured. "Oh, my beloved, thou'rt sick for lack of sleep, even as I."

"Then go you now, I do beseech!" he whispered. "Ah, dear love, go and God bless thee in thy slumbering."

"Oh, John, how I do love thee!" she breathed, bending above him as he knelt. "Oh, would I might kiss thee!" Then she turned, saying aloud, "Then tomorrow, my lord Constable thou shalt come to me, for tomorrow I hold council. So fare thee well." Then she went from him and with eyes of bitter yearning he watched her go, for it was in his mind that he should see her nevermore in life. Then he turned back to his labours; and now, with the three to aid him as best they might, he wrought to ease pain and combat death until the last of his medicines was gone and himself half blind with sleep and weariness.

And yet when at last he lay wrapped in his mantle, slumber he could not; so up he rose and waking his three companions (despite their grumbling), brought them apart where flowed a little stream bright with

the moon and here, seated remote from other ears, spake them thus:

"Since first we sware our oath of brotherhood, more than brothers have I proved ye; so now will I open my secret heart to ye that ye shall do me justice when I am gone."

"Gone?" exclaimed Walter. "Ay, but whither? Wherefore? To what end?"

"Death, as I guess. Yet first ride I to track down and by Heaven's Grace make end of Fitz-Urse and the evil of him."

"I too!" growled Wat.

"And I!" quoth Thurston eagerly.

"Yea, by Saint Guthlac!" cried Walter. "This were but just and we brethren all."

"Nay, first — hear me!" sighed John, bowing weary head upon his hand. "For verily and indeed it is my death I seek and this the reason: Ye mind all, how by ill hap I was taken with nine of our Fellowship by King Tristan? Well, he would have hanged us each and every, out of hand, but for kingly whim. He taketh me to his closet and telleth me he would make all this wide land one country, yea, even the Debatable Land its now desolation to bloom in plenty — "

"Why, this were right kingly thought!" quoth Walter.

"Yea, and himself king paramount, Walter! Now so to do, he must needs win him High Morven and Pelynt; and Fitz-Urse he scorns, but this young valiant Duchess he fears. 'Well, now,' saith he to me, 'go you, John, down into Pelynt and by force or stratagem, bring me this proud Ippolita hither to my will; give me the body of this termagant Duchess here in Gerance, alive or dead, and to thee and thy fellows I give life, — nay, more, from all ye that be outlaws in the wildwood

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I will lift the ban and to each restore and bestow rights of citizenship.”

“Holy Saint Guthlac!” exclaimed Walter. “And what saidst thou?”

“Laughed. So he brings me to little window and shows me our nine poor fellows and each with noose about his neck. ‘Deny me now,’ saith he, ‘and these be all dead men afore your eyes and thyself shall die by the torment.’ Well,” sighed John, leaning heavy head back against the tree whereby he sat and staring haggard eyed upon the moon, “to spare myself the torture, to save these nine lives and win the very many from misery of outlawry . . . hither came I.”

“Ay, and what now?” questioned Thurstan.

“Fitz-Urse. Thereafter, an I yet live, back ride I to Gerance for redemption of our comrades, for except I return or be slain on this venture, these hostages die all. But since, by Tristan’s kingly word, my death on this his service shall be their quittance, so thus, be it Fulk’s sword or Tristan’s gallows, my end is sure, and comrades, by God’s grace, it shall be Fulk’s steel.”

“Except the Duchess Ippolita go to Gerance!” quoth Walter. “Nay scowl not, John; ’twas but a thought.”

“A doggish thought and damns thee!” snarled Wat.

“And yet a thought!” quoth Walter.

“Howbeit,” said Thurstan, “in life and death we are with thee, John.”

“Ay, by the Pyx!” quoth Wat.

“And so saith the De Benyon!”

“So God love ye all!” quoth John, rising. “Let us rest now, for tomorrow we ride early to seek with a patient diligence that asketh no rest until we bring Fulk to bay. And now,” sighed he, hand to aching eyes, “pray God, sleep take me!”

CHAPTER XXXII

TELLETH HOW FULK DIED

It was at peep of day when John awoke and, having bathed him where the stream ran deep, had roused his companions; and now as they ate and drank they debated together in which direction their quest should begin.

“Let us first to High Morven,” quoth Wat, “for ’tis strong town and well-nigh impregnable; so thither, as I guess, shall crawl the Bear —”

“Nay, but,” said Thurstan, “thither last night marched the Seneschal and hath it close invested ere now —”

“Yea, certes!” cried Walter. “And, the city thus closed to him, Fulk, and such as fled with him, be fugitive and so being, whither shall they seek refuge but in the curst desolation of the Debatable Land that is ever safe harbourage for all broke and lawless rogues? How sayst thou, John?”

“That it is most like, so there shall our search begin,” answered John.

So it was agreed; and their meal done, they looked heedfully to their arms, girded them and donned their headpieces. Then, having rubbed down and saddled their horses, they mounted and set forth on this adventure that John knew must be his last.

All the morning they rode, speedily as they might, by leafy alleys and broad glades, for roads they found none, guiding themselves through these forest mazes

as only foresters might and eating their midday meal in the saddle.

Thus toward afternoon they were deep in the wilderness and having climbed a wooded hill, halted upon this eminence to rest their horses and look far and wide upon the forest, mile on mile of dense, dark foliage beyond which, they knew, lay that dreadful desolation called the Debatable Land.

Now as they sat gazing across this broad expanse, John's quick eye caught a blue haze afar that rose above the treetops, slow-curling upon the warm and still air.

"Yonder is smoke!" said he, pointing, "and smoke means fire and this may mean — Fulk. Come, let us see."

So turned they and, guided by this smoke, came suddenly upon a road, or rather track, and here they espied a grey friar whose long legs bestrode a small, shaggy horse all cumbered and hung about with packs and bundles. Being come up with this so laden traveller, John reined up, lifting mailed hand in greeting.

"Now well met, good brother Hilarion," said he. "Hast not forgot me quite, reverend sire?"

"Nay, I mind thee well," answered the friar, his gentle eyes glad; "thou'rt John hight. Now God go with thee, my son, and push on, for yon smoke speaketh black mischiefs, I fear me. Speed ye, good friends. I follow as I may."

So the four spurred forward along this track that wound away through the forest, up hill and down, and so brought them out at last upon a pleasant green set round with little cottages of wattle and thatch, a secluded hamlet that clustered about the smoking ruin of what had been a goodly steading. Now upon the green, over against this ruin, was a great tree, where-

from dangled the body of an old man lately dead, and beneath this pitiful shape an aged woman crouched miserably but who now, beholding the four, rose up and cursed them, crying bitterly:

"Come now, slay me also . . . give me death and be kind . . . make an end, oh, make an end!"

"Nay, thou poor soul!" quoth John; and lighting down, he stooped to touch this aged creature's forlorn white head with hand so gentle and look so pitiful that she wept the more woefully; but now came Brother Hilarion, whose little horse had been outpaced, and she, beholding this tall and gentle friar, cried on him in eager welcome:

"Oh, Brother Hilary! Oh, good Friar Hilary!" and hasted to him and his ready comfort. And presently seated between the Friar and John, she sobbed out her tale:

"This morning early came seven men in arms and one of them great and tall and very fierce. Now though these were great lords by their showing, yet the men of the village, though poor villeins all, would have withstood them; but when they had killed one, the rest fled with their wives and children into the forest. So came these seven to my brother Robert's house yonder and must be fed, and my maids all run away. Then, whiles I served them, came Robert my brother, even he that hangeth above us, and looking on these seven, knew them and cried out like one amazed, 'Fair welcome, my lord Fitz-Urse!' Whereat these cruel lords would have him dead lest he betray the secret of their going. Then they smote me down and when came again my sense, lo — the house afire and my brother hanged thus for warning . . . as thou seest."

“Said these seven aught of whither they would go, I pray you now?” questioned John.

“Yea, sire, afore my brother came in to them, they argled together if they should to Thornaby or Deepwade by the Fen. And would God I were now dead, even as my brother Robert . . .”

“I pray thee now,” questioned Friar Hilarion, “what would ye with Fulk Fitz-Urse, my son?”

“We ride for to call him to final account, good brother.”

“But, friend John, these evil knights be seven, as ye hear; also I know Fulk of old for valiant and famous man-at-arms and today fugitive and therefore full desperate!”

“He is all this!” answered John gravely. “Yet we be four able men and as desperate.”

“Howbeit, my son, ye are but four! So will I, in all humility and by your leave, make your four—five, for I do think ye go about to do that the holy saints shall smile on.”

“Now God love thee for this, Brother Hilarion! I bid thee right welcome with all mine heart for, being to the death, this debate is like to prove something bitter, and full well wot I the valiant might of thee. Lo here, Friar Hilarion, my brothers in arms,—Thurstan, Walter, and Wat.”

Now while they talked together, came the village folk creeping back, and espying this Friar Hilarion, they ran to throng about him with joyous acclaim, their courage restored because of him. And when he had spoken and blessed them, he knelt beside the dead, and with him the four and all the village folk, and prayed very earnestly for the soul of this dead man,

and for all and such as might perchance be doomed to die ere set of sun.

And when at last they mounted all and rode away, they left behind an aged, grief-stricken woman who yet cried fervent blessings on them; and men and women and children who smiled, their woes all forgot awhile, because of Friar Hilarion.

Therefore, reining Apollo back beside his little horse, saith John to him:

"Brother Hilarion, now fain would I, with humble yet hearty thanks, bid thee farewell — even here and now."

"Why so, my son?"

"Good brother, I perceive thou'rt man so necessary unto the crying needs and happiness of this poor humanity, to peril thy life in any quarrel, howsoever just, were to wrong the many."

"Ah, friend John, peril is everywhere; life hangeth ever on gossamer thread; we die whenso God willeth. Thus, should I turn aside from this affray, thinking to be safe, a tree might fall and strike me dead. Also, to end Fulk Fitz-Urse and so bring abiding peace on this poor country were goodly work. . . . Moreover, seven 'gainst four be sharp odds, so come life or death, I strike in with ye this day, imploring God the Great Master of Life to adjudge and aid the right."

"Amen!" said John fervently, and crossed himself.

And now, riding side by side through this hot noon's drowsy hush, they talked very earnestly together, not of war or the chances of coming strife, but of the ancient philosophies, of man his life and the wonder of it and its meaning, until to them came Walter, saying:

"Know you this Deepwade by the Fen, good Brother Hilarion?"

"Ay, I do, my son!"

"I've heard how that 'tis a very doghole."

"It is an abomination reeking to Heaven."

"Why then, an Fitz-Urse win there, he shall be the harder to come at, so let us mend our pace for —" he paused at sound of a voice upraised in harsh, despairing lamentation and, rounding a bend in the road, they beheld a man who crouched beside the way, head bowed between griping hands like one in torment and who alternate groaned sobbing prayers and cried fierce curses. At sound of their approach this man looked up, showing a face all bedabbled with tears and streaked with blood, beholding which John checked his going.

"Why, Nym, good friend," cried he; "what ails thee, man?" Now up leapt Nym to grasp at him with eager hands.

"Oh, noble master!" he cried. "Oh, good my lord Aymery . . . my sweet maid! They do ha' carried her off . . . him it was . . . yon eremite o' St. Wynan's Well . . . across his saddle . . . I did my best but oh, Mother o' Mercy, they reft her from me. . . . Seven they rode and chief among 'em Fitz-Urse . . . yea, yea, even he, I saw his face . . . a black curse on't. Oh, my lord, they ha' gotten my sweet Brynda —"

Scarce was the name uttered than Walter was afoot and raging like man distraught.

"Sayst thou?" cried he in fierce high voice. "Brynda, sayst thou? This sweet-eyed Innocence and Fulk's lewd curs! Ha, now good Saint Guthlac smite and blast them!"

Then he was back in saddle and spurring his stamping horse, was off in wild career, and after him, Wat.

"Good Master Aymery . . . oh, my lord!" groaned Nym, in wild supplication, "wilt save the maid?"

"When chanced this?"

"Not half an hour since, lord! Ah, wilt save my Brynda?"

"God aiding! Meantime, hie you to the village yonder and there wait!" So saying, John touched Apollo with spur and was away, and Friar Hilarion galloping resolutely after. Thus very soon they came where they beheld Walter and Wat halted in fierce argument where two ways met, the while silent Thurstan quested patiently to and fro, who, as John and the Friar came up, called out and showed them a shoe that lay very small and pitiful beside the right-hand track. So thither rode Walter and, staying not to dismount, took up this precious thing on his sword point and thrusting it within the breast of his gambeson, spurred on again, wildly as before, and hard behind him the faithful Wat.

And now they rode amain, spurring up hill and down, on and on through the long afternoon until, reaching the top of a steep hill, they reined in their foam-splattered chargers to look down and across a wide expanse of rolling, wooded country; and now it was they saw at last that which their fierce eyes had sought so vainly all day long, the glint and glimmer of steel . . . seven horsemen afar upon this forest track, riding close and leisurely.

Then Walter drew sword, saying:

"Come now, old Guttler, hast ne'er failed a De Benyon yet . . . do thy best this day now or let me die!"

"Yonder!" said John, pointing down where in the valley a rivulet ran sparkling to the sun, "beside that stream is what showeth like ruined mill and hard beside the way."

"Ay, I see it, John!" answered Wat.

"Well, there, an fortune serve, will we bring them to bay."

“And no place better!” nodded Thurstan. “It standeth in little green apt for such ploy. But to meet them thereabout we must ride apace.”

“Come then!” said John and down hill they galloped.

Now after some while the seven, warned of their approach, checked to view them afar, then, like the tried fighting men they were, swung off from this narrow, rutted track towards that little pleasant green where stood the crumbling ruin of a mill, hard beside a noisy stream; and, after these, spurring their weary horses, rode the five, and foremost of them John, who now checked his companions with gesture of mailed hand. So was a moment’s grim silence, wherein fierce eyes questioned eyes as fierce; and thus they fronted each other, the seven and the five.

Then, while Fulk having viewed the five, each and every, glanced warily about him with right soldiery eye, down at level sward where feet might tread secure, at shady trees and rippling brook to right and left and the deserted ruin behind, his companions, being lords very arrogant, cried out upon these five intruders with menace of quick-drawn steel, bidding them begone and instantly; and loudest of any of the tall, dark-avised man who bore before him the swooning form of the maid, Brynda.

Thus, looking on this man, John knew him, despite rich armour, for Piers, lord of Denholm, that same man had once played hermit at St. Wynan’s Well and bade him “hearken to the stars.”

And now, motioning his fierce companions to silence, Fulk spoke in that mild voice that ever presaged storm:

“Ye now, that bear nor blazon nor device, come ye in amity or no? What would ye?”

At this, and nowise heeding these brandished swords,

John rode nearer and halting before Fitz-Urse, made answer:

"Fulk, we come, God aiding, to end a plague men call Fitz-Urse."

"What then, is it — thou?" cried Fulk, and laughed contemptuous.

"Myself," answered John placidly. "Dost know me, Fulk?"

"Yea, sooth, I mind thee for curdog that barked and fled me o' late."

"Howbeit," said John, "this same dog now cometh to bite, in memory of time past. Lo, here the hand of son to execute justice for black murder of his sire —"

"Ha, babbler, who is't speaks?"

"I am Aymery John, only son of Aymery, one-time Lord of High Morven."

"And, by my troth, I can well believe it!" nodded Fulk, staring on the lean, proud face that gazed back on him with steadfast, grey eyes, "Ay, thou hast his lank jut o' feature; yea, I can believe thee true cub o' the old wolf I slew. Well, I'm content. Go now, son o' thy sire, begone lest I send thee to join him whereso he be — nay, more, if indeed ye would have this maid, take her now and all unharmed. Loose her Piers, man; here's no time for fool's delight or dalliance, man — Yield her up, I say!"

"Then shall she be useless!" cried Sir Piers of Deneholm fiercely, and raised the heavy pommel of his sword but, checking to sudden, frightful outcry, turned to see a slim, fierce shape bounding at him and, smitten by Walter's mail-clad fist, dropped his sword and reeling, clutched at the saddle to save himself; then the maid Brynda was sobbing in the eager protection of Walter's arms and both of them sublimely

heedless of the flashing steel that menaced them; but betwixt them and these vengeful swords rode Fitz-Urse roaring. Then, trotting on his little horse, came Friar Hilarion, long arm aloft, crying them to silence in voice mightier than Fulk and more commanding.

And when this sudden riot was hushed, Friar Hilarion looked round about upon them every one, with eyes sad and very compassionate, and spake them thus:

“Lo, now in but a little while, divers of us must stand afore God, His judgment. So now, on those about to die, I do humbly beseech God’s mercy — ”

“Ha, prate not, Friar!” cried Fitz-Urse. “Instead, get thee to thy holy office, give and pronounce upon us, yea, each and every, full quittance and remission for past sinning; absolve us, Friar, and be done. My lords all,” cried he, but looking only at John, “how say ye, shall we kneel?” And John, looking back into Fulk’s eyes, was assured.

“So be it!” said he.

Then together these two dismounted and together sank upon their knees, as presently did their fellows every one.

And thus, even while they scowled on each other above clasped hands, Friar Hilarion performed the offices for the dying, hastily and as best he might; which done, the fierce seven and the grim five, ever watchful of each other, rose up together, alert and poised for swift fury of action.

“Fulk,” quoth John, as they fronted each other, “I do think this place too strait for proper manage of our horses; how say you?”

“Yea, yea — agreed!” quoth Fulk, lacing his mail coif close. “The horses would but cumber us. It shall be foot to foot, yea, to the last man and no respite!

Aymery John, we give no mercy and ask none, — therefore turn ye back from us and live, or come on and die your best, for we be seven men well tried and resolute, and ye but four — ”

“Nay, five stand we!” quoth Brother Hilarion. “And with my friar’s habit, I for the nonce lay by all meekness of soul.” So saying, he stripped off his frock and stood bedight in shirt of link mail, and straightway from the so many packs that cumbered his little horse, he drew a forester’s long-hafted axe.

“Oh, Hilarion, good comrade,” cried John, “pray you take now my helmet to keep your head — ”

“Not I, brother, no, no! I fight bareheaded to God’s heaven, let come what will.”

And when they had driven their thirsty horses down to the brook and Walter had bestowed the maid Brynda safe from all chance of hurt, they fronted each other, the seven and the five, and all, for a moment, very still.

Then they addressed their shields, out-flashed their swords and they advanced against each other.

And ever as these grim ranks closed upon each other, the hot brown eyes of Fulk Fitz-Urse stared into John’s cool grey.

Nearer they came and in a silence far more dreadful than any fury of shouting, for, being all veterans of the sword, they kept their breath to deadlier purpose; then, whirling up his great two-handed sword, Fulk leapt, but John, turning its sweep, avoided the whistling stroke and smote in turn so strongly that Fulk reeled, recovered and checked John’s instant leap with levelled point.

And now all about these two was din of furious conflict, but they saw only each other; in their ears rang the ceaseless clash of hard-smiting steel, fierce cries, hoarse gasps, anguished groans and Walter’s

high, fierce laugh, while these two plied each other amain with whirling edge and goring point. . . . And long time thus they strove, reeling from each other's fierce attack only to leap in again more furiously, for if Fulk's arms were mighty, John's legs were very nimble and sure; thrice his hard-driven blade bent against Fulk's stout mail, upon Fulk's grim visage was trickle of blood; then John was beaten to his knees, was up again, smiting blow for blow; his shield was riven asunder, he staggered to the shock and searing pain of a wound and in his ears at last rang Fulk's voice roaring triumphant as he came on mightily to make an end. But — even as Fulk leapt thus with terrible sword aloft, so, and as desperately, leapt John to drive in a thrust beneath Fulk's battered shield. . . . Then John's failing gasp was empty, strength and life ebbed fast, yet still he gazed on Fulk, who stood with feet wide-planted, staring down wide-eyed on the broad blade that had transfixed him; then, letting fall his own great sword, he looked at John, reached forth towards him both clutching hands, choked, laughed dreadfully, and spoke:

"Habet!" said he; and with the word Fulk Fitz-Urse died and pitched headlong to the trampled green-sward.

Then, clasping with both hands upon the pulsing agony in his side, John looked around, seeing all things through a red haze, and groaned at what he saw, and stumbled aside and looked up at a heaven that seemed all fire and blood and, striving desperately to speak a name, sank to his knees . . . to his face . . . heard Wat's voice calling on him from vast distances, was conscious of Friar Hilarion's gentle eyes, and pillowing his cheek on kindly mother earth, fell to a sleep very like death.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TELLETH HOW THE THREE RODE AWAY AND WHEREFORE

BELLS that clamoured insistent, rousing him to an unwilling wakefulness, calling him up from soothing darkness to garish light that dazzled him.

Bells that rang out, near and far, until the whole world seemed to echo their joyous pealing; insomuch that, opening his eyes again, he sat up and groaned with the pain of it, then hushed at vision of the gentle lady Adelisa, who bent near to lay slim hand upon his brow and skilled fingers upon his wrist and, smiling down on him, spoke glad-voiced:

“Now the kind saints be thanked, thy sickness is abated, my good lord.”

“Nay, I pray you call me John . . . and how am I here . . . this rich chamber, this voluptuous bed?”

“Wert sore wounded, John, and since they brought thee in, yesterday at dawn, hast lain here calling, calling on Ippolita so piteous I could have wept.”

“Did I so indeed?”

“Yea, dear my lord John, — even as in her sickness she, sweet soul, hath wept for and cried on thee —”

“How then,” cried John, upstarting again, unheeding now pain of wound, “is she — ?”

“Since ever she came home, John, she hath lain all fevered and distraught and in her sickness hath told me, forthright, all I had guessed, that is how she doth love thee. Yea, she hath shewed me all her secret heart and sometimes in her sickness, deeming thee beside her,

hath clasped and kissed her pillow. And I do think it was this strong spirit of Love hath lifted her up beyond reach of death, for she groweth strong again, thanks be to the Mother of Mercies.”

“Amen!” sighed John.

“And thou, John, thou art grown so famous! Thy valour is on every lip — ”

“I pray you what day is this?” he questioned in sudden anxiety. And when she had told him, he clenched his hands, glanced at the window where was a glory proclaimed the time midday, and earnestly besought her to send forthwith for his garments and companions. Now at this she viewed him with troubled eyes, shaking her head in gentle denial; but John growing but the more urgent, and she, being well instruct in leechcraft, as were most ladies of degree, sighed but went to do his bidding, while John, sitting up amid his silken pillows, looked round about upon the luxury of this small, richly-furnished chamber with eyes that quested eagerly for his clothes. Suddenly a tapestried curtain was drawn gently aside and to him came Walter, somewhat pale, yet glad-eyed and very resplendent as to person.

“What, John man,” said he, hands outstretched; “this is well.”

“Not so!” answered John wearily. “For ’stead of dying, I must needs live a while and, thus alive, must up and hie me to Gerance for, ha — Walter, Walter — the day after tomorrow, except I come there to Fovant, our nine fellows, Tristan’s prisoners, shall die — ”

“Yea, but this shall be — the day after tomorrow, John.”

“So will I away this very hour, for my wound irketh me somewhat and I must travel slow — ”

"But Gerance is none so far and —"

"Go, get me my equipment and summon Thurstan and Wat. Why came they not with thee?"

Walter's nimble tongue was strangely silent and, instead of answering, he crossed to the window and stood gazing out into this sunny morning, so that John, feeling his wound athrob and himself so unwontedly feeble, grew angry and cried on him pettishly:

"Come now, aid me dress, I say, and summon our comrades."

"Yea, John, yea," answered Walter, his face still averted, "this will I. Yet no cause is there for such wild haste; thou shalt to Gerance in all good time, I promise thee. But now hark to yon bells, the joy of them! Ha, there is no chime in all the city, nay, in all wide Pelynt, but is filling this sunny morn with glad, pretty clamours, and this for two notable excellent reasons, *videlicet* and to wit: the first is for thyself, John, that thou are alive, and the second is for Fulk Fitz-Urse that he is dead; in signal proof whereof, lo, yonder aloft, upon gate o' the outer bailey, you shall behold Fulk's head."

"How came this, Walter?"

"For that we brought it, Wat and I."

"Then was it very ill done, for he died at the last in fashion knightly, did Fulk, a very man."

"Nay, John, scowl not, for in faith I vow it was well done. For this head o' Fulk, though the birds ha' something marred it already, yet this shag-poll o' Fitz-Urse is a wonder that all folk do gape on; from near and far they come, yea, all Pelynt shall come to gaze on't, I'll warrant me. And beholding this and knowing Fulk died by thy prowess, thou art already magnified, glorified and come to such honour and worship, the

people do everywhere cry up and laud thy name, thy glory speeds and spreads. So is the destiny I foretold come on thee, comrade, — glory, honours, fame — ”

“And a gallows, Walter!”

“Nay, let us speak by the day, the hour, the minute, John. And upon this day, in this minute, thou art the most famous man in all Pelynt. Thus, being already Aymery John, Lord of High Morven by conquest, thou mayst be also Duke John of Pelynt, par Cupidon, for, beside the people, our noble and lovely Duchess — as I dare to guess — ”

“Guess not, man. Tell me how sped the fight?”

“Rarely, fairly, and in fine, right featly, brother — they died all. Yea, every one save two that, being sore smit, cried us mercy and these the reverend Friar Hilarion, the saints commend him, must have us spare. Ha, by Saint Guthlac, this same stout friar and Wat and I so plied them, their shrinking souls quit or fled their stricken flesh, save for these two. Oh, a pretty, pretty doing! Old Guttler here drank deep.”

“Ay, but ye speak nought of Thurstan.”

“He bore himself, John, like our brother in arms, full nobly. . . . But now, speaking of the Duchess — ”

“Walter, I mind me how, ere I swooned, I thought to see Thurstan down, — ay, and mighty Wat also, with thyself and Hilarion in desperate fray above them — ”

“The Friar?” cried Walter, in an ecstasy. “Ha, John, I have seen thee fight full oft, ay, and Watkyn and Fulk Fitz-Urse and many another lusty wight; I am something able thereto myself, being a De Benyon, but never, oh, never, have I seen man fight as fighteth this right lovesome Friar Hilarion! St. Michael and St. George, with the Seven Champions o’ Christendy, might match him — mayhap, perchance, and yet — ”

"And yet," quoth John, "wilt tell me nought of Thurstan, ay, and Wat — summon them hither."

"John man, all is very well with them, ay, and with our beauteous Duchess also, for her sickness abateth, glory be to Heaven! She hath been fever-smit and, whiles her sweet body languished, the soul of her was abroad questing for thee, John, — crying and wailing for thee! And herself, thus beyond coy restraint o' health, cried forth the passion of her love for thee in plaints full tender and therewith passionate, and thus —"

"Nay, how knowest all this?"

"John, to come at thee here, I must needs pass the portal of her chamber, and by times this same portal was ajar, so thus do I know, past all doubt soever, thou art become her hope, her joy, yea, by Saint Guthlac, John, her very life!"

"And I must needs to Gerance!" he groaned.

"The day after tomorrow, John, and I with thee."

"Yea, Walter, and with us Wat and Thurstan, for I would have ye company with me so long as ye may. So now, I pray thee, go bring them hither to me."

Slowly Walter turned and slowly was gone, while John, getting from bed, and despite his pain, went hobbling to and fro to test his strength and fit his weakened body for the long ride of the morrow; thus went he some while and glad to get him back to bed, wearied, yet content, since he knew himself able to bestride Apollo and ride in fashion knightly to what must be.

Then was sound of slow lagging steps and back came Walter, with about his neck the mighty arm of Wat, who came hobbling awkwardly as John himself, yet who now, grasping John's ready hand, smiled his rare smile, saying:

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"Praise God, 'tis but my leg, so can I sit horse."

"Yon was a something bitter affray, Wat!" said John, glancing toward the door.

"Certes, John."

"But why tarries Thurstan?"

Now at this, Walter stared on Wat, who scowled up at carven roof beam and both were dumb.

"So then," said John at last, glancing from their gloomy faces to the sunny window, "the four is become three; our good Thurstan . . . is dead!"

"Yea!" muttered Wat.

"We buried him in leafy shade hard beside the little brook, John."

"Brothers, how died he?"

"In 'fending thy back, John; himself thus unwarded was smitten . . . "

And now they were silent a while, all three.

"So valiant Thurstan is dead! And . . . for me!" quoth John at last. "Well, now, though his body lie dead and buried, his brave soul is up, I dare to say, and shall yet ride with us a little, aiding us to greater achievement; thus in spirit are we four even yet. So should we make his death a sacrament betwixt us and we, for his sake, love and serve each other the more, if this be possible. Therefore brothers both, reach me your hands. . . . Now, hear me confess my present need of ye, for . . . I do so love Ippolita the Duchess and am so merely a man that should she, looking love into mine eyes, reach forth her arms and bid me stay, why then . . . I may do that would shame me to the soul. And so . . . should she . . . perchance . . . be minded to see me . . . or send word to me, let her not come nigh me. Say I am direly sick, say I am out o' my mind, do or say aught ye will, only

. . . let her be prevented, for see her I dare not! Swear me this now, swear me this on our Thurstan's noble blood!" When they had taken this oath, John lay back amid his many pillows like man very weary, saying:

"Tomorrow therefore ere the city wake, I will away for Gerance and would have ye go with me a little until, being come in the good greenwood where first we met, we will bid each other farewell —"

"Nay," growled Wat, "we'll with thee to Gerance and pluck Tristan by's cursed beard, with a wanion!"

"This were vain!" answered John and smiled. "Moreover, Tristan hath no beard."

But now came the lady Adelisa and seeing John so weary and his eyes so much too bright, she bid his companions away and summoning divers soft-footed bower maidens, resettled his bed, looked to his wound and thereafter brought him a draught he must drink.

Thus presently John fell to such profound deeps of life-restoring slumber that he knew nothing of the silent lovely shape that stole to kneel beside his bed, or of the warm lips that touched his hair and, growing bolder, kissed his brow, his eyes, his unresponsive mouth.

Waking finally to a vigorous hand, he opened dazzled eyes to a young sun and blinking, beheld his two companions equipped and armed for the road; and dressing speedily as he might, went forth into the early morning, past sentinels who, saluting, stared round-eyed, and so at last came where their horses stood ready, stamping fretful to be away.

So they mounted and rode across wide court, beneath scowling embattled archways and across echoing drawbridges; then, the city's towering walls behind him, John touched Apollo with the spur and galloped forward nor dared he cast one look behind.

CHAPTER XXXIV

TELLETH HOW JOHN MADE AND SANG A SONG OF FAREWELL

Now though the morning was fair and all things about them bright and glad, being decked out in summer's full array, these three were gloomy men who looked but seldom on each other and seldom spoke; for Wat was by nature taciturn, the speechful Walter was for once quite constrained and dumb, while John was yearning with his every breath for glimpse of that so loved face he must never see again. And since no need was there for any haste, they rode at an easy, leisured amble.

At last, breaking this long silence, Wat enquired fiercely:

"Will Tristan hang thee indeed, John?"

"How shall he not, since I go to him empty-handed?"

"Mightest traffic with him, man, bartering High Morven for thy life, since its lordship is now thine own again."

"I've thought on this, Wat. And yet, Pelynt having taken it, Pelynt should keep it to her own better security. Moreover, Tristan having vowed failure should be my death, may keep his oath, 'spite all I could offer . . . as indeed I think he will. And thus my grief for Thurstan is doubled, that he should lose his own life to save one already pledged and forfeit."

"Ha, Saint Guthlac's curse on this damned Tristan!" cried Walter. "Named he any time for thy dying . . . spake he any hour? It was sunset as I do mind me, eh, John?"

"Ay, at sunset, Walter. So tomorrow, when sinketh sun, think on me kindly."

Now at this, Walter swore fierce, great oath and Wat muttered hoarsely and thereafter they rode in silence again, until before them sparkled a little brook that ran athwart their way with rippling murmur very pleasant to be heard.

Here John drew rein and, turning a little from the road, came where osiers and willows made a flickering shade; and in this pleasant place they dismounted for their midday meal.

"A neat's tongue with fair white bread and pottle of noble wine!" sighed Walter.

"A sheep's ham spiced, and the same!" muttered Wat.

"Ho, faith, we live high these days!" quoth Walter, sighing deeper than ever. "Here be cates full rarely delicate and right succulent — and may rot for me!"

"Ay!" growled Wat. "Yet can I drink."

"Dost mind, John," questioned Walter, looking quite askance on these goodly edibles, "that far day whenas ye came a-riding into the greenwood at Bracton Thicket, playing thy pretty harp and singing so blithe for to hear?"

"Ay!" muttered Wat, forgetting to drink. "And made song of outlawry."

"Well, now — eat!" quoth John, clapping a hand on the back of each, "eat ye, stout hearts, and now, though I've nor harp nor mandora, I'll e'en make for ye song of farewell."

"Yea, yea!" cried Walter. "Sing us cheery song to rouse our hearts, a comfortable song, eh, Watkyn?"

"Ay, song o' comfort, John."

"No!" saith John. "Never a stave except ye eat, not

How John Sang Farewell 313

so much as merest jingle! So eat ye, drink ye, and take comfort for my rhyming." Then while they made some show of obedience, John, looking up at the blue heaven, sang these words in soft rich voice:

"Grieve not that now a while we part
Nor let farewell be sorrow.
But let us with a faithful heart
Think on that glad tomorrow.
How we — somewhen
Beyond our ken,
Shall meet once more and then, ha, then,
Hail each with glad — Good morrow!

"The circling years that ceaseless roll
Must bring their mede of sorrow;
Yet, though flesh fade, each deathless soul
Shall find a fair tomorrow.
Then friend and foe
Of long ago
Shall meet — and lo —
Hail each with glad — Good morrow!

"So, for this parting never grieve,
But comfort of this borrow;
That, though we shall this body leave, —
By death we greater life receive
Wherein can be no sorrow.
For, when all's done,
Beyond the sun
For every one
Is fair and glad — Good morrow!

Thus sang John and scarce was done than up rose Wat to go aside and fumble blindly with his saddle girths, while Walter stared down into the brook and said in harsh uncertain voice:

"Ha, John, to . . . sing thus and . . . death staring on thee!"

"Why, there's the reason, Walter. And now, ere we mount, I'll lighten yon wineskin."

Then presently they rode on again, three men silent as before, though now John's former gloom seem lessened, for his eyes were bright and his shapely mouth less grim.

"Walter," said he, after they had gone some distance, "tell me, pray you, of the maid Brynda."

"She is at court, John, with the Lady Adelisa, to learn her courtly ways, for when old Guttler here shall have won me something more of fortune, she shall be my countess."

"Sayst thou?" quoth John, lips upcurving to quick smile.

"Ay, I do. Somewhen I'll ride a belted earl."

"How sayst thou to this, Wat?"

"Then I'll be Duke of Pelynt and King of Gerance and Emperor o' Christendy."

"Yea — yea!" mocked Walter. "And when thou'rt a poor, peaked, scurvy, famished, ancient, my poor Watkyn, I'll e'en cherish thy miserable bones — thou shog!"

"Howbeit," quoth John, "thy countess, Walter, shall prove sweet flower to thy wearing, for this same Brynda is beauteous as any flower, and as sweet."

"And hath oft spoke o' thee, John, and how didst once make and sing her song o' lullaby."

"And seemeth long since!" sighed John. "And what of honest Nym, that hath been father to her, ay, and mother, likewise?"

"He is safe back in Shallowford."

So they talked, riding leisurely until, as the sun be-

gan to sink, they reached the summit of a lofty hill and from this height they could descry, very faint and small with distance, the walls and towers of Fovant within Gerance.

"And now," said John, looking round about with eyes that strove to take in all they might of this fair countryside he was to see no more, "I go forward alone."

"Not so, by Saint Guthlac!" swore Walter.

"We also!" growled Wat.

"We go with thee to the gallows foot!" cried Walter.

"And beyond!" quoth Wat.

"Nay," said John, smiling from one set face to the other, "thou'rt to be an earl, Walter man, and beget lusty children, I pray. And thou, Wat, has great achievements yet afore thee. So here part we indeed . . . here is last farewell. Tomorrow at this hour think on me and know I loved ye passing well. And so . . . no more, I pray ye!"

"Ay . . . tomorrow!" said Walter very earnestly. "And ha, brother John, deliver not thyself to King Tristan before thou must . . . tomorrow!"

"Yea, verily," said John. Then, looking on them no more, he rode on down the hill. Yet he had gone but very little way when cometh Walter galloping and his comely face very wet with tears.

"John," he gasped, "oh, John, should I . . . as may be . . . beget me a son, he . . . shall be called John Aymery and . . . may God make him such man . . . as thyself." Then, with choking cry, he wheeled his rearing horse and spurred furiously away; yet coming beside silent Wat, turned beside him to gaze on the man who, all solitary now, rode through the sunset's fading glory.

CHAPTER XXXV

TELLETH OF JOHN, HIS LONELINESS

EVENING had fallen when John had come so near the walls of Fovant that he could see the great gateway of the town athrong with bustling crowds; folk mounted and afoot, with droves of cattle, flocks of sheep, lumbering waggons, merchants, beggars, knights and soldiery, all hurrying townwards, or hasting to be gone ere curfew sounded and the city closed its gates for the night.

Now, beholding all this stir, John turned aside from the busy highway and rode apace until he was deep amid the greenwood that he loved so well; and now, pacing very slowly, he looked about him for likely place where he should pass this his last night; and going thus, he talked now to his horse Apollo, as he was wont to do when thus alone and pensive:

"Apollo, old friend, thou art methinks the last friend these eyes shall see . . . and this our last night together . . . and a bitter thought, for she is, to my thinking, all womanhood's veriest perfection. And thou hast seen her, Apollo, with thy one wise eye, how very fair she is! Thou hast borne all the sweet allure, all the warm beauty of her, and this is an added bond betwixt us, old warhorse. . . . And verily, Apollo, she is, as we do know, thou and I, such woman . . . and this poor John so yearneth . . . the sweet white body of her, the great pure soul that looketh from her eyes, that singeth in her loved voice, these be so lovely, indeed that poor John hath fled to 'scape the least

sound or vision of her . . . Now, were she of beauty less compelling or I of nature more cold, I might be with her, even now . . . and here is thought so wonder sweet the very thought is pain, my Apollo! To hear her — now! The sweet sudden murmur in her voice, as when she sayeth 'John'! To see her now! The soft brightness of her eyes, as when she looketh on me — up and a little sidewise. . . . The quiver of her ruddy lips waking from pensive gravity to glad smile! Her body's noble graciousness . . . the shy sweet langors of her that yet hideth spirit so dauntless. Her sudden angers as sudden past . . . All that she is and . . . ah, my Apollo, all that she might have been! Dost mind the babe, how she kissed it and fondled? And, spite her mail, showing so womanly tender! Then waked in her, I think, the sweet, glad consciousness of what might be . . . the end whereto she is so nobly formed. Yea, and all this might have been! And here is the abiding pain and sharp grief of it . . . Tomorrow at sunset I must be snatched hence and she . . . oh, my Apollo . . . having sorrowed for me a while, shall be wife, perchance . . . and mother . . . and I? Shall I then grieve, grow sick and shake as now I do at mere thought? Oh, mystery on mystery! Thirty-six years, Apollo, and little to show for it this night save woeful heart and stricken body. Thirty-six years o' life . . . it is something early to go . . . and yet Thurstan, methinks, was younger."

Here Apollo lifted his head and whinnied softly.

"How, then, dost snuff water? Go thy ways and where it is, we will make our last camp together."

After a little going, John heard the murmurous rippling of a brook and in place shady with trees, he dismounted; then, while Apollo quenched his thirst

with snorting rapture, John gathered dry wood and made a fire and laying out such food as he had, sat down with his back to a tree; but instead of eating supper, straightway fell to profound meditation, his wistful gaze upon the crackling fire. Longtime he sat thus, going over in his mind all that had befallen him since that magic hour wherein he had first looked into those long, heavy-lashed eyes of the maid Lia and, presently knowing her for Ippolita the Duchess, was more certain even than he had been that his mission must never be accomplished.

From this deep revery he was roused at last by sudden loud snort from Apollo, who had been cropping the grass beside him, but who now stood, ears cocked, sensitive nostrils quivering, and his one bright eye very round and watchful; noting all of which, John sat up and, looking where gazed Apollo, saw the leaf-age stir faintly and without troubling to reach for weapon spoke:

“Friend or foe, come forth!”

“Friend . . . a friend!” cried a voice. “A gentle soul that like shy squirrel peepeth ere he showeth!” And into the firelight came a smallish, slender man who skipped on twinkling legs, bowed and struck a posture, saying:

“Behold, Messire, one that with nimble wit and tripping tongue shall quip, jape and jingle ye to such joyance ye shall eat and laugh and, laughing, bid myself eat to — ”

“Nay, sit thee to the fire and welcome, Wiglaf, and stead o’ quip or jape, eat and, eating, tell me thy news all or any, whence come ye and whither going?”

“Right potent lord and good my master, thy speech argueth a past familiarity, the which is no matter for

wonderment, since I go up and down and am right familiar with high and low, rich man, poor man, serf, socman and villein. But I am last from Gerance, the notable town of Fovant. And now, sweet sir, at your bidding I engorge."

"Yea, eat, man. And what of Gerance? Saw you Tristan the King?"

"The king, sir, the king, — good faith he is my coz; we consort full oft. I was his familiar, his *alter ego*, *vade vecum*, fool, friend, counsellor, his very shadow!"

"And why must beg thy supper?"

"Of this, sire, be thou judge. This morning, having mocked for him a throstle's pretty carol with this my pipe, 'Fool,' saith he, 'could I but play on men as thou on thine oaten reed, I'd be a god to rule this world and give peace and joy to all mankind.' 'King,' says I, 'were thou Fool and I Majesty, I'd do better thing.' 'How so?' saith he. Says I, 'Sire, I would unking myself and leave the world to God.' At this he scowleth on me and ere I might win him to a laugh, came messengers with news how the mighty Fulk Fitz-Urse is surely dead, slain in single combat by one John o' Green, whereat Majesty biteth finger and scowls amain and, being in his orchard, sends for his counsellors — he hath but four and seldom heeds them — and puts the case how this same John, his life in pledge for nine rogue outlaws, hath won great fame and honours in Pelynt and is moreover son to Aymery rightful Lord of Morven, and, being thus great, news is that he shall form alliance with Pelynt and march embattled 'gainst Gerance, for the salving of his nine comrades aforesaid. 'And what say ye to this, my lords?' saith the King. Whereat they counsel him to hang these nine forthright and set all things in posture of

defence, since certes this John shall come for vengeance. Whereat Tristan scowls on and bids 'em away. Then turning on me — and here, good master, is the crux, the point, the very kernel of my tale — 'Fool,' saith he 'hast heard these wise men; now what sayeth Folly?' 'Kingly coz,' says I, ''stead of hanging these nine, make each a knight, myself a lord and send us as thine ambassadors.' 'And how then?' says he. 'Why, then, coz and King,' quoth I, 'myself shall play this John tenderly on my pipe, these nine shall jig it featly, and 'stead o' blood and battle shall be japish jest and jollyance.' "

"Well?" questioned John.

"Ill, good Sire, very ill, alack! For Majesty fetches me swingeing clap o' the ear, bids me away, and orders great gallows set up i' the marketplace. So fled I and left it a-building, for as a lad I watched them hang my father, since when I have quite, quite lost all joy in such spectacle."

"Then King Tristan will hang these men?"

"Ay, noble master, this day at set o' sun. And what's more, I am out o' place and must seek me new service. Ay, woe that one hath been fool to a king should be such fool to himself that fool-like he must for fools lesser, fool."

CHAPTER XXXVI

TELLETH HOW JOHN CAME TO TRISTAN THE KING

It was past noon hour when John rode into Fovant and reining up in the deep, fortified gateway, beckoned a lounging man-at-arms who, eyeing John, his worn habiliments and tall bony steed, laughed and called divers of his fellows, idle as himself, to point and show them this same poor-showing stranger bestriding such unlovely animal, whereat they laughed also. But when John, turning from them, would have ridden forward into the city, they came thronging about him to demand his name, condition and business, and were so unwise to grasp roughly at reins and bridle; whereat Apollo, snorting fierce disdain, tossed proud fierce head and reared mightily, tumbling his aggressors right and left, whose startled outcries raised such alarm that forth ran the guard, and with them one in knightly armour, to behold men who sprawled or cherished their bruises, and a lean man on great lean steed who looked about him, faint-smiling, and now spoke in speech and tone that nowise matched his poverty of aspect:

“Messire, I come now to tender up my body to King Tristan, his will. I am called John of the Green.”

At these words was instant hush, while all eyes gazed on this shabby-looking man who bore himself like man something weary, yet whose grey eyes showed bright and serene.

Now the knight to whom he thus addressed himself was young and passionate for great achievements and, hearing this name that Fame had so trumpeted of late,

he could but gaze upon John for a moment quite speechless; then saluting him with an almost eager humility, issued breathless orders. And presently John rode on, hedged about by twinkling spearheads, with guard of heavy tramping soldiery whose round eyes must view askance this man whose single arm, so ran the tale, had conquered the mighty Fitz-Urse.

Through outer and inner defences they brought him and so at last to a pleasant orchard where, seated in great elbow-chair beneath an apple tree, sat Tristan the King, chin in hand, frowning down at a parchment scroll open upon his knee. Beholding John, he set this by and, speaking no word, motioned with his hand, whereupon arms clashed, feet trampled and, looking round, John saw they were alone.

"So John a Green, hast failed me?"

"Yea, Majesty."

"And presently must yield thy life therefore."

"Well, I am here. And according to our compact, my nine comrades go free."

"They shall hence at sunset. Though a king, I keep my word. But for thyself, hast in this mission sped very marvellous ill."

"Sire, no man could have sped worse; it is beyond all doubting!"

"Ay, truly!" quoth King Tristan, leaning back to stare up into the eyes that gazed down into his with look mild yet resolute.

"Ye have made Pelynt even stronger than aforetime."

"I dare to think I have so, your Grace."

"By Fulk Fitz-Urse his death, this termagant Duchess Ippolita is mightier than ever she was."

"As I pray God she may ever be, Sire."

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"Therefore, John a Green, I hold ye have deceived me."

"Well, here stand I! And, my lord, I come expectant of no mercy nor with any vain arguments to justify my acts, but to bring my body to your vengeance."

"So then, ye do confess the respite from death I granted you and your fellows, this respite, I say, you have but used to counter and cross my purposes?"

"Nay, rather to aid this valiant Duchess as best I might."

"And in thus aiding her, ye have played false to me and my interests!"

"Well, Sire, she is woman and solitary. Thou art man and potent king. And I am poor flesh and bones to bleed and break to thy will and pleasure. Moreover, Old Sol sitteth yonder in the West, thy gallows standeth ready, so wherefore tarry ye?"

"Art so eager to die?"

"Tristan, speaking thee as man to man, there is no man living hath more lust to live than I, God wot! Yet since die I needs must, I'll die my best to pleasure thee. Therefore, Sir King, let us to the gallows and play our several parts as best we may."

"Yea, but," murmured the King, chin in hand, smiling askance on John, "how if, 'stead of more kindly gallows, I doom thee to the torment, John a Green? How then?"

"Majesty," answered John, blenching despite himself to the cruel glitter of these narrowed, watchful eyes, "not to abate thee one tittle of thy kingly pleasure, — see how I sweat now at mere thought on it! Anon, having nerves and sinews for thy torturers to play on, I shall doubtless groan some while to the sweetening o' thy vengeance. . . . But Tristan, asking no mercy,

yet being gently born and noble as thyself, I had liefer thou gave me kinder death."

Slowly the King arose and slowly went limping to and fro, glancing from his eye corners at John, who watched him beneath care-furrowed brow.

"Aymery John," quoth the King at last, "I kept good watch on thee, yea, all thy doings in Pelynt. Day by day had I news o' thee."

"Well, there were many spies in Pelynt, my lord."

"Thus I know how the Duchess honoured thee, made thee of her privy council and Lord Constable of Pentav-alon."

"These spies told no falsehood then, my lord."

"Yet ye come in very sorry estate."

"Even as I went, Sire."

"Then how have ye anyways profited? Where now and of what avail all these honours Ippolita bestowed?"

"I bear them in my heart, Majesty. And when this heart shall fail me, I shall, by God His grace, carry them in my spirit. Perchance they shall fit me in some sort for whatsoever adventure waiteth me beyond death —"

"So then," quoth the King, limping to sudden stand-still, "it becometh plain and certain to me now that ye do love this so warlike Duchess."

"My lord, it is yet more certain how this is matter that toucheth your Majesty no whit. Therefore, whiles ye do spare me breath, let us talk on thyself, myself, life, death or what other matters ye will."

"And she, as I am assured, returneth your passion."

"I pray you, Sire, ere your tormenters begin on me, am I permitted speech with my nine fellows?"

"And how," demanded the King, turning suddenly to view John thus face to face, "how an I should now give thee life, ay, and freedom?"

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Once again outstarted beads of anguish upon John's furrowed brow, his hands knit to quivering fists, his grey eyes, their steadfast serenity quite gone, wavered and, bowing his head, he spoke in groaning, broken accents:

"Ha, Tristan . . . plague me . . . not so! Thou hast my body . . . be content, man, let this suffice thee . . . nor blast my mind with torment of false deluding promises to conjure to my imagining all . . . all that might have been! Be kingly man and for thy royalty's sake, spare me this —"

Thus spake John in his agony and covered his haggard face in griping hands and was dumb, while the King stood pensive, viewing him beneath drawn brows; at last he touched him on the shoulder and, frowning still, beckoned with crooked finger, and limped on before.

So came John whence they might look down upon the marketplace thronged already with a great concourse, for the sun was low; now amid all those chattering townsfolk rose the tall gallows and beside this and close guarded, were nine men who waited to die, woeful men who blinked wide-eyed and stirred restless with dismal clank of fetters. . . . King Tristan lifted his hand, whereat a voice cried in loud authority, hushing this clamorous assembly to sudden quiet, and upon this silence was tapping of hammers, then jingling clash as their shackles fell and these nine doomed prisoners stared like men dazed; then, freed thus, leapt to embrace one another and grasp each other's hands.

And now or ever John might find speech, the King limped on again, nor paused until they were come into that small chamber John must needs remember, where sat a grey-headed man busied with ink and quill. Him the King addressed, saying:

"Go forth, Eustace, and suffer none come hither until thou hear my little bell."

"So be it, gracious Majesty!" answered Sir Eustace and, bowing himself out, closed the door.

Now coming to the narrow window, King Tristan leaned there, his sombre eyes turned where the sun was descending in glory; and with his dark gaze yet on this vivid splendour he spoke:

"My lord Aymery, in half an hour it will be sunset and . . . I, intending thy death, instead do give thee life. So at sunset shalt ride forth whereso thou wilt."

John closed his eyes and, setting his back to the tapestried wall, he leaned there weakly and drew a deep breath; then looking on the King's averted face, spoke a little uncertainly:

"Sire, what must I give . . . what wilt demand of me for . . . such priceless gift?"

"That which no man may give of his own will, my lord John, since it cometh ever and only of itself; I mean thy love and friendship." Here he turned and on his lips a smile that lit his sombre eyes in fashion wonderful; now, seeing John's amaze, he chuckled saying, "Oh, I am a king politic; thus, if this so determined lady of Pelynt love thee indeed and thou her, thou shalt ere long be her lord and Pelynt's Duke, and I would have such potent lord lean to friendship rather than enmity. And thus —" he paused and glanced towards the window again, for on the air was vague clamour, a growing hubbub of fierce shouts, cheers, voices that cried the King's name, trampling feet coming nearer. . . . Suddenly and without ceremony, the door burst open to show Sir Eustace, who stared as one confounded beyond words; then, or ever he might speak, a slim yet imperious hand set him aside and upon the threshold stood the Duchess Ippolita.

CHAPTER XXXVII

TELLETH HOW IPPOLITA THE DUCHESS CAME TO GERANCE AND WHEREFORE

CLAD was she in bright mail and rich surcoat, whereon flamed the three scarlet leopards of Pelynt and by her side a long broad-bladed sword; but she wore neither helmet nor mail hood and her long shining hair made a rippling splendour all about her. Close behind her, to right and left and completely armed, showed the stalwart forms of Simon and Tomalyn, him pale by reason of his recent wound yet very grim of aspect. Then spake the young Duchess Ippolita in voice resolute as her look:

“Tristan, I am told that except I yield me to thy mercy, John Aymery, Lord of High Morven, shall die felon death. So come I, hasting to yield myself unto thee and with myself this that was the Duke my father’s sword. This and no more cede I, for, though I die or lie prisoned, Pelynt shall yet defy thee and find perchance mightier arm than woman’s to avenge me. Now and therefore I bid thee suffer my lord John to go his ways . . . and so, be done.”

Thus speaking, she did off the great sword and thrusting it into King Tristan’s hands, turned and looked at last on this dumb John, — to see in his pale face and wide eyes such wonder, such joy and adoration, that she forgot all else. So they gazed and, lost thus in each other, essayed not speech, since here for them was rapture no lips might ever tell forth. And as they stood thus motionless and silent, King Tristan, glanc-

ing from one to other, adoring woman and man who worshipped, turned to gaze forth of the little window with eyes that saw only, by contrast, how he himself must seem more solitary than ever. At last, looking on the great sword he held:

"My lady Ippolita," said he, "here is sword I have seen in press of battle ere now and . . . in battle I had hoped to win it, but — not thus! Therefore, take it again, suffer me!" And speaking, he buckled it about her shapeliness once more. "Keep it, valiant Ippolita, keep it until thou find one worthy to bear it. And now, I pray ye, let us forth and walk a while among my apple trees, for I've that I'd fain speak on." So, with Ippolita's hand in his, he limped forth into the radiant evening, she viewing him meanwhile with quick, appraising eyes and ever-deepening interest. . . .

Now seeing how earnestly they talked together, John went aside where stood Simon and Tomalyn, shoulder to shoulder, hands on swords and very truculent of eye, yet who welcomed John right heartily and made answer to his questioning turn about as thus:

SIMON: Last night, my lord, she summons us, Tomalyn and I, and we find her new risen from her bed —

TOMALYN: And she so lately sick of fever, see'st thou —

SIMON: And with her only the lady Adelisa and thy comrade, Sir Walter.

JOHN: Ah, so he was there! Then 'twas he —

SIMON: Himself, my lord, and somewhat talkful.

JOHN: I'll warrant him!

TOMALYN: But Her Nobility's Grace in mighty taking —

SIMON: Yea, good sooth! One while she is hot and rageful, much as I mind the Duke her father —

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TOMALYN: Ay, verily, and yet anon all sobbing tender woman is she —

SIMON: And lastly cold and fierce as her own fiercest self. And first she is for marching on Gerance forth-right, with such powers as she may, to thy deliverance; yet from this Sir Walter dissuadeth her, lest Tristan, secure behind his walls, should in defiance hang thee, my lord, therefrom —

TOMALYN: And the end on it all was, she swore us to secrecy and commanded us, Simon and I, to be armed and horsed ready for to ride with her at dawn.

SIMON: So was it done, my lord. For at sunrise we mount and away, and no man the wiser, save only Siward that oped the gate to us, and him she sware to silence.

TOMALYN: And so, here is she alone at Tristan's mercy.

SIMON: Well, here be two swords shall smite for her whiles they so may.

TOMALYN: Yea, comrade, yea, by Saint Cuthbert!

JOHN: Now comfort ye, good friends, for I do think we shall live to see wonder of better days and great matters achieve, lo — yonder!

Looking whither he directed, they stood amazed to see King Tristan's sinister head down-bent to kiss their Duchess' hand, while on her face showed such kindness as put these sturdy veterans to no little wonderment.

Then the Duchess beckoned John beside her and King Tristan, looking on them with his dark musing glance, reached forth to them his hands, saying:

“My lord of Morven, thy mission was none so ill done, if twixt Pelynt and Gerace may be such alliance as shall bring law to the wild and to us all abiding peace and amity. To the which end, and since this right

valorous Duchess hath honoured me with her presence here in Gerance, I, so soon as may be, shall to Pelynt with no force save that of friendship and — ”

His voice was lost in sudden hubbub that grew to panic, with wild shouting from walls and towers; trumpets brayed alarm, answered by others that shrilled defiantly in the distance. And looking thitherward, they saw the gleam and glitter of an advancing host; a forest of lances where horsemen rode, clumps of spears where marched the foot, with serried ranks of bowmen, and above this deep and threatening array, plain to see, fluttered the leopard banner of Pelynt.

“Tristan,” cried the Duchess, reaching him both her hands, “good friend, believe me now, as God is my strength, I know and knew not aught of this!”

“My lady Ippolita,” answered the King, clasping those appealing hands and looking into the eyes that met his own so steadfastly, “I do believe thee now and ever shall. Come, let us to the gate and make enquiry.”

Through townsfolk clamorous with fear, past hurrying soldiery who mustered under arms, they came to the city gates that opened to King Tristan’s gesture and forth went he and the young Duchess beside him.

Out from the deep ranks of this mighty oncoming array two knights came galloping, and one of these a very tall man who bore upon long lance a thing all shagged in wind-blown hair; nearer they came at speed and, since they wore open helmets, the Duchess knew them for Walter de Benyon and Vivyan Chand of Ler, called Wat, and saw he bore upon his lance point a shrivelled, ghastly thing that shamed the sight, as, reining up in full career, he brandished his lance, crying in great roaring voice:

“Ha, Tristan . . . Tristan of Gerance, lo, here the

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head of Fulk Fitz-Urse! Say now, must we change it for thine own?"

Even as he challenged thus, the Duchess had loosed off the golden belt that clasped her slender waist and set it about King Tristan's shoulders or ever he might answer; then, lifting hand, she cried in voice clear and high:

"Let now Pelynt hear me! Thus do I honour His Royal Majesty, Tristan of Gerance, taking him to my friendship. As for ye twain," said she, turning on Wat and Walter, "go summon hither to me my chiefest lords and lords of my council, and bid them come amain."

Then, giving her hand to King Tristan, she turned back into the city, where presently, instead of fearful outcries, were glad shouts, hearty cheers, and a merry riot of bells.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHEREIN IS MADE AN END AND A BEGINNING

THE moon was up, rising in a glory; and a very kindly moon (thinks John), since her tender radiance showed to his eager eyes the beauty of this mailed face so near his own, these long eyes that even as he looked, looked back on him — upwards and a little sidewise.

And the wind had hushed itself to sleep, like truly friendly wind (thinks John), since in this pervading stillness when his companion spoke he lost no least inflection of her soft voice and could hear its sudden tenderness whenso she spoke his name, which was not often; for though their glances, oft meeting, were eloquent and told much, their lips spoke but seldom.

They rode very slowly and very close together, because Apollo, sensing how matters were (like the sagacious animal he was) went at leisured ambling pace and as near his four-footed companion as might be.

“Tomorrow!” said John suddenly at last and speaking his thought aloud.

“Whenso you will, my lord,” she murmured, instant to know and answer it. “And yet . . . so soon! Art verily a very impatient John.”

“Ay, I am, God knoweth I am!” he answered, quick breathing. “For I was as one dead and am alive again! Alive . . . ah, praise God, alive to make all my dearest dreams come true! Therefore I would not waste another day nor hour, no — nor minute.”

“Well, here am I to thy will, my John, to be thy very own.”

"And this the never-ending wonder!" he exclaimed. "Indeed, such marvel I dare scarce believe it even yet. . . . That I am to live . . . and that thou . . . oh, Ippolita, that such as thyself should stoop to this poor John indeed!"

"Nay, be not such humble John. Hadst been lowliest serf 'stead of so nobly born, thou art such man I must needs have loved thee."

"And this day would have died for me!"

"For that I do so yearn to live for thee."

Here Apollo, quick to sense his master's desires, halted in place where trees made a shadow, and paused there a kissing while; and so, at his own will, ambled on again.

But now, seeing her eyes so heavy and how she drooped in the saddle, John questioned her anxiously:

"Art so wearied, Beloved? To ride so far in one day . . . art very weary indeed?"

"Yea truly!" she sighed, yet glancing on him sideways with look marvellous bright and wakeful.

"Why, then," said John, bending near, "let us turn back. Fovant is yet close behind us and there may'st sleep in comfort."

"And so . . . waste this night!" she murmured. "Ah, now be not an addle-pated John."

"But," quoth he, lifting her hand to kiss it, "we can nowise reach Pentavalon until the dawn."

"So shall we hold company together this livelong night," she murmured.

"Oh, blessed thought!" he exclaimed fervently. "And thrice blessed night!" Now at this she sighed again and very plaintively, saying:

"And I, alas, bedight again thus hatefully in link mail!"

"Yet thou art right glorious so, Ippolita."

"Yet I would not seem glorious . . . tonight, John."

They reached a hill and climbing its steep, paused to look down and across this countryside of dark forest, and the road dusty with the trampling of many feet, a white track, uphill and down, narrowing upon the sight until it was lost in a distance whence ever and anon was flash and flicker where the host of Pelynt marched homeward.

"Thy people, my John!" she murmured, pointing thitherward. "And thou my lord and their Duke . . . tomorrow."

"God make me worthy and able thereto!"

"Nay," she answered, her hand within his ready clasp, "seem not such meek Duke, my lord of High Morven."

"Dear mine Heart," said he, reaching sudden arm about her, "pray thee tell now how thou wouldst have me seem."

"Thyself," she answered tenderly, "valiant and wise and resolute in all things, even as thou art. And yet, being my man, I'd have thee also somewhiles to make show of weakness somewhat, that I may cherish and comfort thee — nay, kiss me not thus . . . high against the moon lest we be seen."

"Why, who now shall espy us in this dear solitude?"

"Lo — yonder thy brothers in arms."

Now looking whither she directed, he saw afar upon the road behind them two horsemen who, judging by their gestures, were in fierce disputation.

"Ay, these be my loggerheads," laughed John. "God love them!"

"And must they go ever thus at discord, John?"

“Ever and always, yea, and grieve for each other’s absence.”

“And show the prowess of very paladins!” said the Duchess, as they rode forward down the hill. “And they are so faithful and love thee so well, my John, they shall one day soon ride with an earl’s following, an it please thee, my lord Duke, to so will.”

“And being in the valley, none may see us now!” saith John.

But coming where the ways divided, and the moon so very bright, they beheld in the distance an approaching traveller, a very tall man whose long legs bestrode a small steed all hung and cumbered about with packs and bundles, at sight of whom John reined up, saying very gladly:

“Yonder cometh Brother Hilarion, whom God bless! For certes he is the most properest friar that ever donned frock and that was, upon a time, as I do think, a great knight, and today a friend and servant to all that be anyways needy or distressed.”

“Then we are right well met!” said she, and John wondered to see her loved eyes so wondrous bright and the smile that curved her ruddy lips, as they turned aside to meet this unexpected wayfarer.

“Dost then know this good Brother Hilarion?”

“Nay, but I have heard great good of him. Moreover, Sir Walter told me how mightily he aided ye ’gainst Fulk Fitz-Urse — ”

Now when they had met and greeted each other, the Duchess leaned graceful from her lofty saddle to give him both her hands, saying:

“Right gentle and valorous Friar Hilarion, thyself of all others I now choose to wed us, this my lord of Morven and me, consecrating us unto each other. Here,

beneath God His heaven in the wilderness, shalt thou wed and make us one."

"And in good sooth," said the Friar, getting nimbly from saddle, "no place were more fit, noble daughter, for here stand we in God's own cathedral the work of His very hands, these mighty trees, His pillared aisle, and in yon firmament His moon to light us . . . Come then, kneel ye. . . ."

But scarce had they done so, than to them rode Wat and Walter, who, seeing what was toward, made haste to dismount and kneel reverently also.

Thus then in the wildwood, and the summer's night all hushed about them, were they wed; and thereafter, with hand upon the down-bent head of wife and husband, Friar Hilarion, lifting gentle eyes to radiant heaven, prayed for their happiness; and having thus implored God's blessing on them, turned to be gone. But ere he could mount, the Duchess caught his toil-worn hand and kissed it, saying:

"Dear Brother Hilarion, do but come to us in Pelynt and shalt rule an abbey."

"Gracious lady," he answered, touching her hand to his lips in courtly gentle fashion, "I do thank thee now from my heart. But such as most do need my services be poor folk very humble and shyly timid as the deer and as wide scattered. Thus, whiles I have strength, I must go seek them out, even as now. And so, dear my children, I leave ye now with God."

Then, mounting his little horse, he jogged away upon that pilgrimage of service that was to end but with his life.

For a long moment after Friar Hilarion's small steed had jogged him beyond their sight, they stood mute all four; then, and or ever John guessed or might pre-

vent, Ippolita was on her knees before him and had kissed his hand, saying:

“Thus now do I acclaim thee my very loved lord, Aymery John, Duke of Pelynt . . . tomorrow, ere this hour, all men shall acclaim thee so — ”

Then John had lifted her to his heart, but she held him off and laughed a little unsteadily.

“Nay, John,” said she. “Oh, my Lord, here be other two would salute their Duke,” and she showed him where on the sward knelt mighty Wat with Walter beside him. Now seeing them thus at his feet, John stood mute for a breathing space.

“Oh, my brothers,” said he, clapping his two hands on their mailed shoulders, “right trusty friends, I would pray ye to aid me in the future as in the past, that I may prove myself the abler for your strength and love. Yet whatso the future bring, know ye that ever and alway we are brothers, yea — to the end of our days.”

“My lord Duke,” said Walter, “right worshipful Nobility, now that I would speak thee full fair, alack, my poor tongue faileth me and may nowise speak thee all that swelleth this heart o’ mine . . . only this: For thee and thine will I live the best I may and die if needs must and . . . ha, John man, right gladly!”

“And I,” quoth Wat, “am your Grace’s man . . . for both our sakes, John, and all that hath been, is and shall be.”

“And tomorrow,” saith John, as he raised them, “tomorrow will I name ye lords of our council. And now let us — homewards.”

So they mounted, all four; but scarce had they turned back into the road than Walter reined up suddenly:

“Lo ye, now, here is rare night’s work, *laus Deo*,

amen! Ha, John, had I thy gift, now would I make and sing ye a rarely fair nuptial song somewhat on this wise": Then, standing in his stirrups, he lifted mailed arms to the moon-bright heaven, declaiming thus:

"Oh, fair night, oh, night most rare,
Oh, night of nights beyond compare —

and there the Muse spreads pinions, alas, and leaveth me in quag. But here is new beginning for ye twain and all on us! With Fitz-Urse and his mischiefs ended, and Tristan in sworn amity, soon now shall seem a new heaven and a new earth. And as for ye that being two are become merest one — showed night ever so fair? And such moon to light ye? And yet tomorrow, tomorrow, for all Pelynt shall dawn the gladdest day that ever brake. How sayst thou, my Watkyn?"

"Yea!" he answered, looking from one to other with his rare smile. "For ye and all, — with dawn shall break a great and glad — Good morrow!"

"And by Saint Guthlac, there's eloquence," quoth Walter, "shalt never better it, Wat man, and so be dumb! Come thou!" Then, lifting hands in salute, they were off and away at a gallop.

Silently the young Duchess watched them go until they were vanished quite, and as silently John watched her; the rhythmic beat of those speeding hoofs sank to a faint throbbing, a whisper and so to silence, yet ever her dreaming gaze was on the distance and yet, being very conscious of John's mute adoration, she was still silent; nor did she speak until they came on a merry streamlet that flowed across their way with pretty murmuring. Here she drew rein and looking down into these moonbright waters:

"Ah, dear my John," she sighed, "in Pentavalon we must be Duke and Duchess, with so many staring eyes to watch us and ears to hearken, but . . . in this dear wildwood, I am only thy maid Lia and thou my loved John o' the Green. . . . And the way is so long . . . and we be man and wife!"

"Yea, by God!" cried he, and taking her hand, he kissed it and turning from the road led her into the green beside this rippling brook until, where trees grew thick, the streamlet widened and deepened to stilly pool that yet made a faint whispering.

Here they dismounted and while he set about lighting a fire, she busied herself to reach and unfold their cloaks and set out such viands as they had. So, when John had tended their horses, they sat and supped together, though often quite forgetting to eat.

Seated betwixt fire and moonlight, where fell a silvery beam through the leafage overhead, Ippolita, nowise regarding the food before her, murmured:

"Oh, fair night! Oh, night most rare
Oh, night of nights beyond compare —

Canst rhyme me to this, my Jingling John?"

"Nay," he answered, likewise forgetting his supper, "I can but think of thee . . . thy beauty . . . thy sweet loveliness, and how I do . . . worship thee."

"And, in this mannish armour, my John!" sighed she, gazing beyond him where Apollo (being ever a most companionable horse) cropped the tender grass hard by. And now, feeling how John's hand trembled on her own, she must bid him eat his supper; and then talk of Apollo (a little breathlessly, be sure), of his wisdom, his speed, his high courage and strength, and

how therefore, despite his unlovely showing, she must needs love him; whereat Apollo (wondrous beast) as if he understood her every word, turned to look at her, then, snorting enquiry, drew nearer, staring (and no wonder) to see his master unlacing this woman's mail coif who, rid of this encumbrance, gave her lovely head a little shake and down fell the shining ripples of her hair. Beholding this, Apollo (ever enquiring) drew yet nearer, saw this woman looking up great-eyed into his master's down-bent face, heard her broken murmur:

“Oh, my John . . . my dear . . .”

Now as she sighed thus (and to Apollo's further wonder), she caught up a great handful of this shining hair and drew it about his master and herself also. But seeing how, thus half-hid within this silky curtain, they kissed, and how she swayed to the yearning clasp of his master's arms, then Apollo finding himself nowise further regarded, switched his rattail, snorted and turning away (like the wise animal he was), left them to each other.

